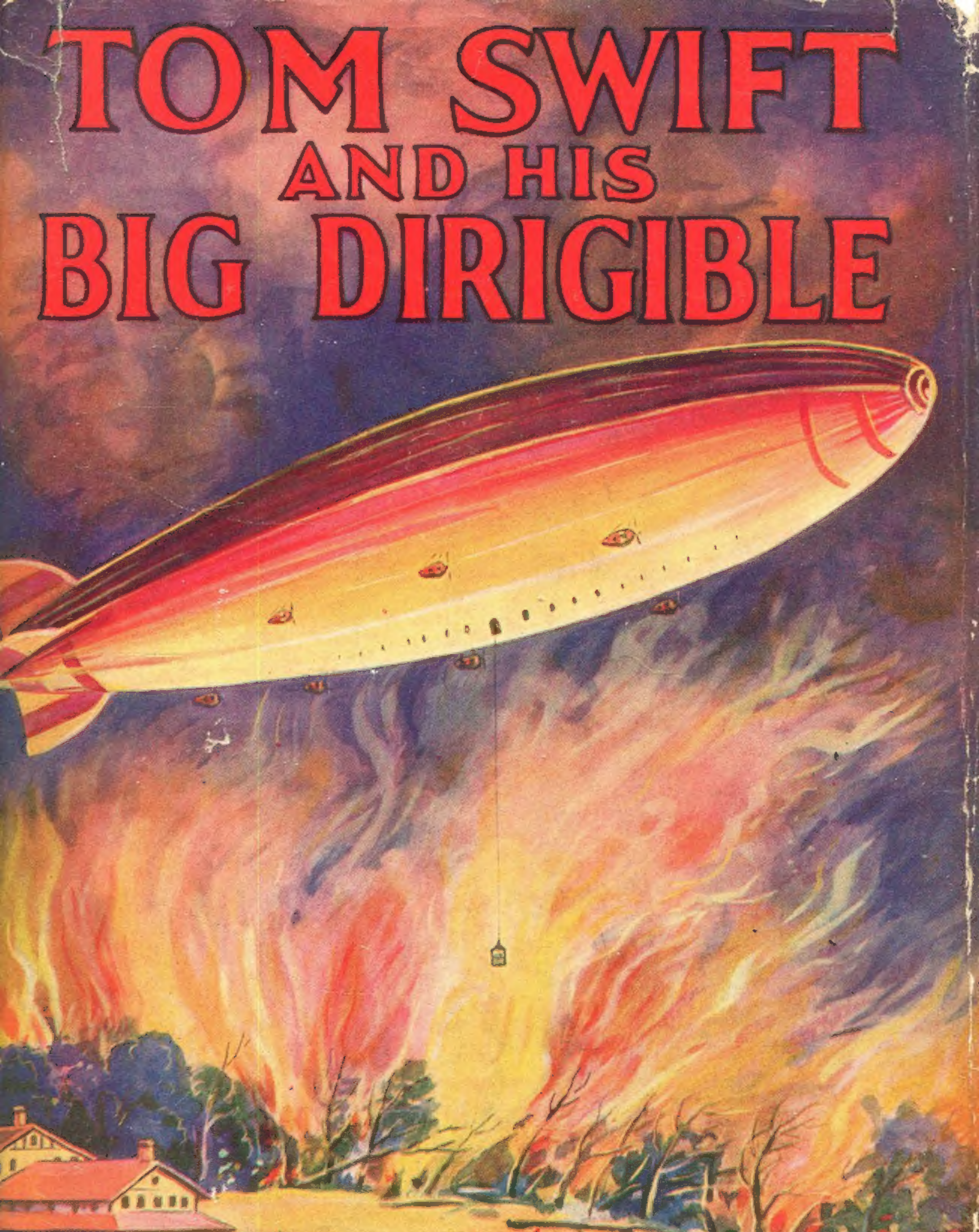
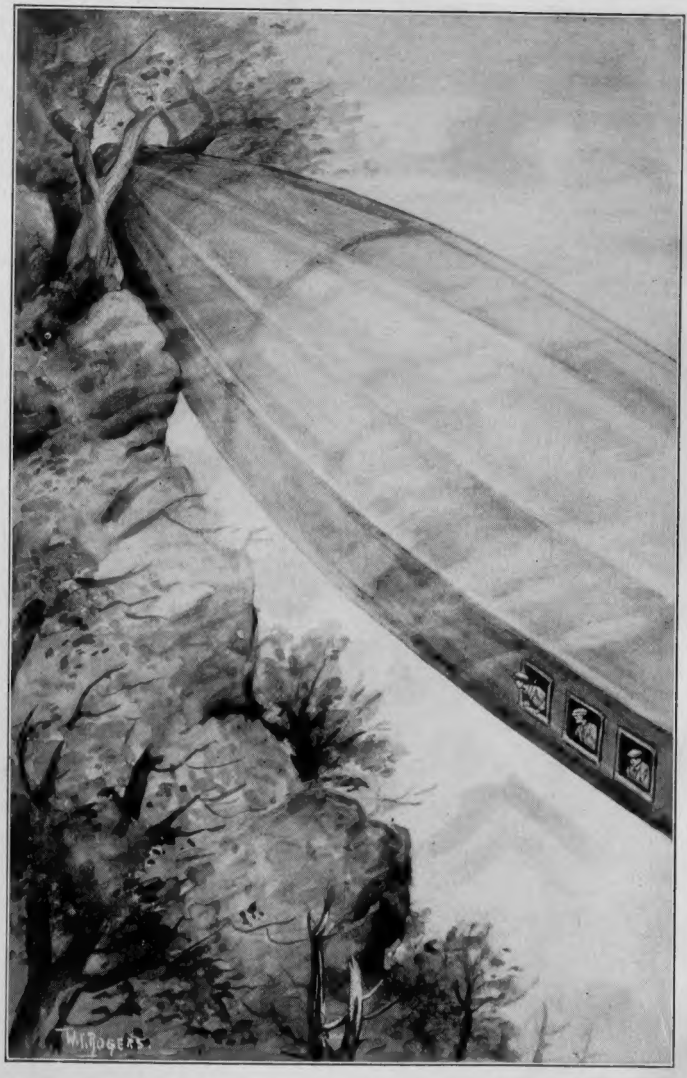
TOM SWIFT AND HIS BIG DIRIGIBLE



BY VICTOR APPLETON



THE BIG DIRIGIBLE HAD RAMMED HER NOSE INTO THE TREE.

Tom Swift and His Big Dirigible. *Frontispiece (Page 139)*

TOM SWIFT AND HIS BIG DIRIGIBLE

OR

Adventures Over the Forest of Fire

BY

VICTOR APPLETON

AUTHOR OF

"TOM SWIFT AND HIS MOTORCYCLE,"
"TOM SWIFT AMONG THE DIAMOND MAKERS,"
"TOM SWIFT AND HIS TALKING PICTURES,"
"THE DON STURDY SERIES,"
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DON STURDY IN LION LAND

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Tom Swift and His Big Dirigible

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TOM SWIFT AND HIS BIG DIRIGIBLE

CHAPTER I

SPOUTING FIRE

"SUCH a big dirigible would cost a barrel of money, Mr. Jardine."

"I know it, Mr. Swift. But my company is prepared to go the limit. We want the finest and fastest dirigible ever built, capable of carrying at least fifty passengers and enough supplies to travel ten thousand miles."

A short, stout, fussy man, attired in a natty gray business suit, arose and nervously paced the office of the Swift Construction Company as he uttered these specifications. Tom Swift and his aged father looked at their visitor, but neither spoke. Tom's face had just the suggestion of puzzled doubt. Mr. Swift was interested, but not unusually so. He was approaching the twilight of life and even great projects did not interest him as they once had done. He left them to Tom.

"Yes, it must be the biggest dirigible ever built!" exclaimed Martin Jardine. "And you must build it, Tom Swift!"

"That's easier said than done," returned Tom, with a smile.

"Oh, you can do it if anybody can," snapped Mr. Jardine. That was his way of talking—snappily. He seemed to be all business from his brightly polished tan shoes to the top of his crisp, brown hair. As he continued to pace up and down, now and then shooting a glance at the Swifts, father and son, who were seated, he pulled out a cigar, snapped off the end, flicked out a pocket lighter, set it aglow with an impatient movement of his thumb and, a moment later, was puffing a cloud of smoke about the office.

"Oh, excuse me!" he exclaimed a moment later, his right hand slipping to the left upper pocket of his vest. "Have a cigar."

He held out two, twins to the one he was smoking, and offered one to Mr. Swift.

"No, thank you," said the aged inventor. "I don't smoke."

"Then you, Mr. Tom?" The cigars went in that direction.

"Thanks, but I don't indulge," Tom answered, with a smile. "And if I did I'd be afraid to tackle one of yours. They look particularly deadly, if you'll excuse my saying so."

"Well, they are a bit strong," said the fussy little business man, who appeared to have called on a very important errand. "But I like to taste something when I smoke. It quiets my nerves."

However, his nerves did not appear to be under very good control just then, for, in spite of his notion of a quieting smoke, this devotee of my Lady Nicotine was having all he could do to repress himself.

"Well, what about this proposition?" he asked, coming back to his seat and brushing aside a cloud of his own smoke.

"Do you really want us to undertake a big, expensive dirigible like this?" asked Tom, tapping some papers on his desk, papers of which the top one bore a rough sketch of a great airship, in shape like the *Graf Zeppelin*, but larger and differing radically in some of its parts.

"Of course! Why not?" demanded Mr. Jardine. He was out of his chair again, and had taken a fresh cigar from his pocket, though the one he had lighted only a few minutes before still contained much smokable material. "You haven't any doubt of the ability of my company to foot the bills, have you, Mr. Swift?"

"Oh, no," Tom answered. He had taken the precaution of having a commercial agency look up the rating of the Jardine company before one of its heads called on him, and the report was

satisfactory. "But you don't seem to realize, Mr. Jardine, that an airship of this size would take a long time to construct and you are evidently in a hurry."

"I'm always in a hurry!" snapped the fussy little man. "But this is to be an all metal plane, and, as I told you, we can supply the metal. Have a cigar!" he shot at Mr. Swift who was examining some sketches and blue prints the visitor had brought with him.

"No, thank you. I don't smoke."

"Oh, so you don't! I forgot! Excuse me! Then you, Mr. Tom."

He held another out to the young inventor.

"I am still not smoking," chuckled Tom.

"Oh, yes! Well, now let's get down to business. When can you finish this dirigible for me?"

He sat down in the chair again and leaned back as if for a protracted visit, but as Tom paused before answering Mr. Jardine was up again and pacing the floor, while smoke came from his mouth like a small furnace under forced draft.

"Ten thousand miles," murmured Tom, his gaze concentrated on nothing in particular, a trick he had when intently thinking.

"At least that," stipulated Mr. Jardine.

"And fifty passengers," went on Tom.

"More, if possible," snapped the caller.

"Well——" began Tom Swift, but he was interrupted by the ringing of a telephone bell. His father picked up the receiver, he being nearest the instrument, and spoke into the transmitter while Tom reached out to take up one of the blue prints.

"It's your wife, Tom," said old Mr. Swift, handing the instrument to his son.

"Oh, hello, Mary!" Tom called into the mouthpiece. "Yes! No, I'm not too busy to talk. Oh, yes, about our Mt. Camon trip. It's all arranged. I just got word about the hotel reservations. Yes, I'll have the House on Wheels thoroughly gone over. Of course! Yes, my dear. All right! I'll be over in a little while and show you the choice of rooms we can have. Good-bye."

During this interruption Mr. Jardine had tried not to show his impatience, but it was difficult. He paced the floor more nervously and faster than before, while lighting another cigar, the third in less than fifteen minutes, and not one of them smoked more than half way.

"Excuse me," said the young inventor to his caller. Tom put the phone back on the desk and added: "That was my wife, and we have just completed our plans for a summer vacation. We are going to Mt. Camon. Hope to get off next week."

"Mt. Camon. I know it! Beautiful spot. Won-

derful hotel there, but in the middle of a great wilderness. Wonderful food, though! Best meals I ever ate! How they manage it I don't know. But you can't be going there!"

"Why not?" asked Tom Swift with a half smile.

"Because you are going to undertake the construction of this big dirigible for us and that will take all your time and attention."

"Oh, I don't know," replied Tom easily. "I haven't fully decided to undertake the work."

"Oh, but you must!" insisted Mr. Jardine. "Excuse me for being so emphatic," he went on, tossing the almost fresh cigar aside, "but you are the only one who can do it. You must do it!"

"Well, I'll think about it," said Tom, once more reaching for some blue prints. "But I must also take my wife on a vacation."

"Tom hasn't been married long," observed old Mr. Swift, smiling.

"Congratulations," murmured Mr. Jardine. "It's a big contract, I know."

"Do you mean marriage?" asked Tom, with a smile.

"No, I'm speaking of this big dirigible. When can you let me know?"

Tom was doing some mental calculations, having as much to do with the individual who had

called on him as on the actual construction of the giant of the air. There had been some correspondence prior to the visit. Martin Jardine had first written guardedly of what he wanted the Swift Construction Company to undertake. Tom had had Ned Newton, his financial manager, look up the concern's rating and, finding they were big producers of metals and machinery, at last consented to an interview which was now taking place.

At this talk Mr. Jardine had gone more into details than in his letters, and for the first time had given some definite idea of what he desired as to the size of the dirigible, the number of passengers and crew she could carry, and her cruising range. These figures rather surprised Tom Swift, accustomed as he was to gigantic undertakings.

"Now let's go over it all again," proposed Mr. Jardine, as Tom finished some hasty calculations in pencil. "There are one or two points I must insist on."

Tom raised his eyebrows slightly at the word "insist," but politely inquired:

"What are they?"

"This must be an all metal ship," said Mr. Jardine.

"That is not impossible," replied Tom. "We have made some ourselves for experimental

work, and the United States Government has proved that a metal dirigible is feasible."

"Another point," went on Mr. Jardine, in his rather snappy manner.

"What is it?" Tom asked.

"The metal used for the gas bag—envelope I should say, as it will not be a fabric bag—this metal must be oralum."

"Oralum?" questioned Tom.

"Yes," went on Mr. Jardine. "That is a new, secret-process metal we have developed in our works. One of my objects in having you build this big dirigible for us is to advertise our oralum. It is much lighter and stronger than duralumin which, up to the present, was the only metal sheets that could be used in constructing dirigible envelopes. Aside from these points, you can use your own ideas on the craft, Mr. Swift."

"Thank you," said Tom, and if his caller had not been busy lighting another cigar he might have noticed a tinge of sarcasm in the words.

"When can you start?" snapped Mr. Jardine, puffing out more smoke.

"Well," said Tom slowly, "I haven't exactly made up my mind to start at all. Oh, I'm not turning down your order," he was quick to add to forestall a vehement objection. "It's just that my father and I must talk this over further before reaching a decision."

"Then you can't let me know now?"

"No, we must have a further conference. I will let you know when. And now, if you will excuse me, I must run over to the house to see my wife. She is anxious about our vacation plans."

"Tom is just married," said Mr. Swift, again, as if to excuse to the caller the young man's rather precipitate closing of the interview.

"Oh, that's all right. I understand," and Mr. Jardine smiled. "The ladies first, always. I'm quite fond of 'em myself. Well, be sure to let me know when I can see you again, Mr. Swift."

"I will. Good day!"

Mr. Jardine had not long left the office, hurrying away with his nervous air, his cigars and his smoke, when Ned Newton came in as Tom was about to depart for the Swift mansion where his wife, who had been Mary Nestor, was waiting for him.

"Hello, Ned!" Tom greeted his financial manager.

"Hello, Tom. Wasn't that Martin Jardine I passed in the hall?"

"I suppose so. He just left here. Came in to have me sign that contract for building him a big dirigible." Tom tossed a sheaf of typewritten sheets to Ned.

"Oh, yes, from the Jardine company. Um!" Ned picked up the documents.

"You've seen them before," Tom reminded him. "You said the contract was well drawn, legal in every way, and properly safeguarded us."

"Yes, I did," Ned admitted. "It's a perfectly legal contract as far as it goes."

"Doesn't it go far enough?" asked Tom.

"Well, yes," Ned had to admit. "Oh, the contract is all right. It's this Martin Jardine I was thinking about."

"What's the matter with him?" asked Tom.

"He smokes too much," broke in Mr. Swift, with a chuckle. "Not that I object to smoking, though."

"That isn't it," Ned stated slowly. "It's just that to me Jardine seems to strike a false note. He's snappy, businesslike, and up to snuff. For all that, I think there is something not quite true about him."

"He's eccentric, I'll admit," said Tom musingly. "But so is Mr. Damon."

"Mr. Damon doesn't want you to sink hundreds of thousands of dollars in building a freak dirigible," remarked Ned.

"No, that's true. But the Jardine company assumes half the risk and expense—even more," Tom added, "for they will supply the oralum metal plates, and that's a big item."

"All the same, Tom," went on Ned, "I'd go a bit slow about this, if I were you."

"I intend to," Tom said, looking out of the window of his office into the April sunshine. It was this warm, early spring sunshine that had set his blood and that of his wife tingling, so they had made plans for an early vacation. "Yes," went on the young inventor, "nothing is settled yet. We are to have another conference and then——"

There came a sudden interruption in the shape and form of a veritable giant of a man who burst into the private office without any warning.

"What's the matter, Koku?" asked Tom, for, obviously, something was wrong.

"O, Master!" cried the giant in a booming voice. "Him House on Wheels all bust up! Him spout fire! All blaze! Lobk!"

Tom, Mr. Swift, and Ned Newton peered from a back window. They saw a cloud of smoke and spurting streaks of fire near the garage where the wonderful traveling auto, a small house in itself, was kept. As they looked, they heard a sharp explosion.

CHAPTER II

A TREMENDOUS UNDERTAKING

"THERE she goes, Tom!" cried Ned Newton, as an even greater cloud of smoke enveloped the House on Wheels, following the sharp blast. "What caused the blaze?"

"It must be the fireworks I brought in last night!" cried Tom Swift, as, followed by Ned and Mr. Swift, he hurried from the office to the yard of the plant.

"Fireworks?" cried Ned.

"Yes. I meant to put them in a safe place, but I forgot them and left them in the House on Wheels. But what made them go off, I wonder?"

"What are you doing with fireworks at this time of year?" Ned wanted to know, as he hurried along beside his chum. "Independence Day is three months off."

"I know it," Tom replied. "But it's Mary's birthday to-morrow and ever since she was a little girl she has had fireworks on that occasion. I couldn't omit it the first year she's married to me."

"Of course you couldn't," agreed Ned. "So

you were going to have a fireworks display for Mary's birthday. Well, the fireworks picked a good day for themselves."

"What do you mean?" Tom exclaimed.

"To-day is April Fool's day," answered Ned.

"Well, it's a poor joke to set off fireworks in my House on Wheels, even if it is April first," declared Tom. "Look at 'em!"

By this time he and Ned were running directly toward the famous House on Wheels. Workmen from the shop were also congregating there, some carrying portable fire extinguishers.

From all appearances, these would be needed. Skyrockets, Roman candles, pinwheels, aerial bombs, and other pyrotechnics were making a grand display from within and about the House on Wheels.

"She's a goner I'm afraid!" sighed Tom.

"Looks bad," agreed Ned, and then both ran on to help put out the blaze.

While they are doing this, it might be mentioned, for the benefit of new readers, who Tom Swift was and something told about him.

In the first book of this series, named "Tom Swift and His Motor Cycle," Tom Swift was introduced. He was a young inventor, living with his father, Barton Swift, in the small city of Shopton where the Swift works were located. Tom's mother was dead, but he and his father were

looked after by Mrs. Baggert, their housekeeper.

As a lad Tom was interested in mechanics, and that he could develop ideas and invent machinery was proved when, after Wakefield Damon, of the neighboring town of Waterford, smashed his motor cycle by running up a tree, Tom bought the wreck, repaired it, and made it better than ever. Since then he and Mr. Damon, a most eccentric man, had been good friends.

In time Tom developed into a great inventor, like his father, and, as Mr. Swift grew infirm, Tom assumed entire charge of the plant.

The shops where new inventions were tried out and various machines manufactured now covered many acres of ground and, as the plant had grown, had been removed from near the Swift homestead, in which comfortable house Tom and his father lived with Mary Nestor, whom Tom had recently married. Tom frequently urged his chum, Ned Newton, to marry Helen Morton, a girl friend of Mary Nestor. But, somehow, Ned could not make up his mind to this. He said he was too busy managing Tom's financial matters to think of getting married.

Tom and Ned were each in their early twenties now and were doing a fine business. For repairing a broken motor cycle was only one of Tom Swift's achievements. He perfected motor boats, submarines, an aerial warship, an electric

locomotive, and was one of the first to develop talking pictures.

The latest invention of the young mechanic had been a great auto, which he called his traveling home, and in the book immediately preceding this full details are given. That volume is called "Tom Swift and His House on Wheels; or, A Trip to the Mountain of Mystery."

It was on this Mountain of Mystery that the young inventor solved some strange puzzles and had some breath-taking adventures, during which he nearly lost his queer House. It was right after this that he and Mary Nestor decided to get married.

Tom Swift brought his bride to the old homestead, and while he and Mary lived in one wing of the big place, with Koku, the giant, as a sort of bodyguard, Mr. Swift, well looked after by Mrs. Baggert and Eradicate, an aged Negro, lived in another part of the mansion.

Tom had only just returned from a short trip he and Mary had made in their House on Wheels when he received a letter from the Jardine company about building a big dirigible. There was some correspondence and the first interview was just over when Koku gave the alarm of fire.

"What started it, Koku?" asked Tom, as, with Ned and the giant, he stood in front of the House which was still spouting fireworks.

"No can tell. All of a quick go Boom!" answered the giant, whom Tom had brought back with him after a perilous trip to a wonderful land.

"Must have been spontaneous combustion!" gasped Ned, as a big skyrocket whizzed over their heads.

"I hope that's the last!" cried Garret Jackson, the shop manager, as he edged in closer with a fire extinguisher.

"I bought an awful lot of fireworks," Tom admitted, with a sort of groan as he saw what danger his precious House was in. "They can't a quarter of them have gone off yet!"

"Some birthday celebration!" laughed Ned. "You ought to get Mary here!"

But it was no time for talking. There was great danger. However, the workmen in the Swift plant were accustomed to dealing with emergencies of this nature, and some well directed streams from the chemical containers soon had the worst of the fire out. A few crackers and some pinwheels continued to ignite, but the greatest danger, from some powerful aerial bombs, had been averted.

"But I can't understand it," murmured Tom as he went into the House on Wheels to view the damage. "Though I put the fireworks in here

hurriedly, I was careful to see that there was nothing near that could set them off."

"Was the motor running just before you put the Roman candles in here?" asked Ned. "If so, there might have been some heat in that."

"The House wasn't in use yesterday," Tom said. "It was being put in shape for the trip Mary and I are to take."

"What trip is that?" asked Ned.

"To Mt. Camon," was the answer. "It's quite a wonderful mountain resort in a big piece of woods. Mary's father and mother used to go there and she thought she'd like to go back. Dad, too, needs a change, and I thought of running up there with him, Mary, and her parents and leaving them for a month or so. I'd have to come back, especially if I undertake this big dirigible."

"Have you decided on that yet?" Ned wanted to know.

"Not yet," Tom answered. "But now it looks as if I'd be busy getting this House in shape," and he gazed ruefully about the blackened and still smoke-filled interior of the odd conveyance.

"It will need some repairs," agreed Ned. "But perhaps not many. It's lucky it wasn't all blown apart."

"Yes," Tom assented.

"What possessed you to store fireworks in here?" Ned wanted to know.

"Well," Tom said, "it may have been foolish; but as I came in with them last night, I thought I was followed by some one. It seemed as if some man was sneaking around the plant. I spoke to some of the watchmen and even got Koku on the job. Then I got to thinking even a stray cigarette in this mass of fireworks would set them off, and I judged that if I stuck them in this House no one would know where they were. So I did."

"And did that mysterious individual who followed you set them off?" asked Ned.

"That I can't tell. Koku and I and a watchman looked about the place after I had put the fireworks away, but we found no one. Perhaps I was mistaken."

"Well, there wasn't any mistake about this fire," said Ned grimly.

"Unfortunately, no," agreed Tom. "But I'll rush the repairs."

The next few days were busy ones for Tom Swift. For one thing, he had to attend to his wife's natal anniversary and this was a successful affair, in spite of the fact that most of the fireworks had gone off prematurely. There were enough left for a small display.

After the birthday party, Tom Swift spent much time superintending repairs to the big traveling home, in which he hoped to take his wife, his father, and the Nestors to Mt. Camon.

In the midst of these busy operations fussy Mr. Jardine came back, at the time appointed, to get Tom's decision regarding the big dirigible.

"Well, have you decided yet, Mr. Swift?" asked the caller, nervously lighting another cigar.

"I will soon," Tom replied, with a smile. "We'll go into a conference now. My father will be here in a moment and I will send for Mr. Newton."

The conference was rather long and very important. Mr. Jardine was enthusiastic and insistent and urged that the work be started at once and rushed to completion before fall. He had the oralum metal plates all ready to use, he said.

"Even with them, we'll need a lot of special machinery and motors," objected Tom. "It's going to be a big job."

"That's why I came to a big inventor," said Mr. Jardine, with ready tact. "I know you can do it!"

"What do you say, Ned?" Tom asked.

"The financial end seems to be all right," stated the manager. But he did not look at Mr. Jardine as he said this. Though keeping silent, Ned had not changed his opinion about the stout, fussy little man.

"What's your word, Dad?" Tom asked his father.

Mr. Swift was slow and careful and, in spite of his age, had a keen business and inventive sense.

"I think it can be done, Tom, if you want to do it," answered Mr. Swift.

"There's no question about my wanting to do it," Tom said. "I'd ask nothing better than to turn out a craft like that if we can do it at a fair profit. It will be a big advertisement for us."

"And us. We appreciate that," said Mr. Jardine. "We expect big things of our new metal, once it gets to be known as ideal for dirigible envelopes. We think we have a wonderful thing in oralum. I do hope you will go on with this, Mr. Swift."

Tom was silent for a few seconds and then he made a momentous decision. He reached for his pen to sign the contracts and said:

"Yes, we'll build the big dirigible."

"Good!" cried Mr. Jardine.

CHAPTER III

THE "SILVER CLOUD"

"WELL, Ned, there she is!" exclaimed Tom Swift, several weeks after the disastrous explosion of fireworks and the following decision to undertake the construction of the big dirigible. "What do you think of her?"

"Who? What? Where?" asked the financial manager, who had come into Tom's private workshop to discuss some business matters.

"The *Silver Cloud*," Tom replied, with a wave of his hand.

"*Silver Cloud?*"

"Yes. The new dirigible I'm building for the Jardine company."

"Dirigible!" cried Ned. "I don't see her," and he looked around the room.

"You poor fish!" chuckled the young inventor, "you don't suppose I have the giant dirigible in here, do you? I'm speaking of the model I just completed."

He pointed to a shelf where a good view could

be had of a wonderfully complete but small model of what would eventually be the big all-metal dirigible.

"I've named her the *Silver Cloud*," went on Tom, and the reason was obvious, for while the model was constructed of fabric, it was painted with an aluminum preparation which made it look like a silver mass of vapor in a blue sky. A further semblance to a cloud was in several flat, wave-shaped fins protruding from the sides of the long gas bag, at the point of greatest diameter.

"What are those dinguses for?" asked Ned.

"To keep her on a steady keel when we're speeding along about two hundred miles an hour," Tom answered.

"As fast as that?" exclaimed the manager.

"Faster, maybe," was his chum's answer.

"So that's how she's going to look, is it?" murmured Ned, putting his hands, containing several papers for Tom's attention, behind him and standing in front of the model. "Nice lines to her!"

"It's the most scientifically constructed dirigible I ever built. Planned to build, I should say," Tom said, "for we've barely begun work on the frame. Things have got to rush to get her ready by fall."

"Can you do it?"

"Got to! Luckily, I can buy ready-made many of the motor and other parts. The Jardine company has on hand all the oralum plates I'll need, so the greatest problem is fitting the *Silver Cloud* together."

"It's a good name," decided Ned. "I only hope the company will turn out to be as good as this model."

"What company?" asked Tom quickly.

"The Jardine company," was the reply.

"I thought you looked them up."

"I did, and they are reported O. K. But every time I try to get a line on this Martin Jardine personally, I'm met with evasive answers or else silence. Tom, I'm afraid there's something wrong about him."

"But he has met his advance payments to the dot and he says if I need more money to call on him."

"It isn't all a question of money, though that's usually the most important factor," Ned stated, as he sat down in Tom's private experimental office. "The company is all right. But it's this nervous, fussy, eternal-cigar-smoking stout little man in the gray suit that I'm uncertain about, Tom."

"Oh, I think you're too fussy yourself, Ned. He

seems all right. A bit dictatorial and impatient, but he and I have got along so far without difficulty."

"Well, I hope it keeps up. Now about these papers. Here are some for you to sign."

"All right. Let's get through with them, and then I've got to go out in the shop and see how they're coming on with the frame of the *Silver Cloud*. She's going to be a great ship, Ned!" and Tom's eyes sparkled with enthusiasm.

"I believe you," said the manager.

The *Silver Cloud* was, indeed, the most ambitious piece of aircraft work ever undertaken by Tom Swift and his associates. Not only the great size, but the cruising radius and the accommodations for passengers exceeded anything ever before attempted.

When the routine business was disposed of, Ned went out to the main shop with Tom and watched the workmen getting ready for the first step in the construction of the great airship.

Briefly, it may be said that while the generally familiar cigar-shaped envelope to hold the lifting gas was the design followed, there were some radical departures in construction. The stabilizing fins, for one item, were a novelty.

Instead of having the powerful motors suspended in more or less unstable gondolas protruding from and beneath the oralum frame and

envelope, the driving apparatus was within the outer skin. Only the powerful propellers, six in all, were exposed. Each motor was accessible from the interior of the oralum envelope.

Within the metal envelope were the quarters for the crew and accommodations for passengers. The latter were forward, and were to be, in miniature, as elaborate as the living quarters on a palatial ocean liner.

The gasoline and oil for the motors, the stores of food and water that would be needed on a ten-thousand-mile voyage, and tools and spare parts for use in an emergency, were to be carried near the quarters for the crew and officers.

The greater part of the oralum envelope, of course, was filled with a new and powerful lifting gas, perfected by Tom Swift and his father. It was not as explosive as nitrogen, but not quite as safe as helium. However, it was easier and cheaper to make. One reason that Martin Jardine had come to them to build his giant dirigible, was because the Swifts held the secret of this gas. The craft was to be built on a cost-plus basis and would be the property of the Jardine company when finished, though of course much credit would accrue to Tom Swift for his work on it.

"She's going to be big!" gasped Ned as he took in the lines of the skeleton, as yet only partly in place.

"She sure is!" admitted Tom. "Wait until we begin to fasten on the outside oralum plates and she'll dwarf the Graf."

"That's going some!" exclaimed Ned. "But will she be as comfortable to ride in?"

"More so," Tom promised. "Wait until you see the passengers' staterooms, the electrically equipped kitchen, the dining room, and the recreation gymnasium. Why, this ship will be so big and steady you'll never know she's moving."

"Even in a storm?"

"It will take some storm to bother the *Silver Cloud!*" declared Tom. "She'll be as steady as a church!"

The days that followed were exceptionally busy ones for Tom Swift. Never before had he agreed to construct a craft for such a fussy individual as Martin Jardine. That representative of the company which furnished the oralum plates seemed to live in Shopton, he was there so often. More than once he got Tom out of bed by sunrise to ascertain how the work was coming on, or to make some new suggestions about the craft.

But as Tom was working for him, and as all payments had, so far, been promptly met, and as there was to be a good profit in the enterprise, Tom found no great fault.

"We're in business to do business," he said to

Ned, who criticized Mr. Jardine. "I might as well have his money, as any of our competitors."

"Well, he needn't be so fidgety."

"He is a bit fussy," Tom admitted. "But then, this is a big undertaking."

Tom Swift found the work more and more exacting and vexatious as the days went on, for many and troublesome matters cropped up in connection with the construction of the big dirigible. At one time a shipment of oralum plates would be held up. Another time the wrong kind would be sent and delays ensued from that fact. Then, too, there were disappointments in getting motor and other parts from outside sources. But the Swift plant, big as it was, never could have undertaken to build the ship by fall if all the work had been done in Shopton.

"Well, how's the *Silver Cloud* coming?" asked Ned one day, as he and Tom sat in the private office, talking.

"Good," Tom answered. "She'll be ready by September. I hope, in a few days, to leave with Mary and the others on that little vacation to Mt. Camon."

"Going in the House on Wheels?"

"Yes. Mary wants to travel that way because the House was so intimately associated with our wedding trip."

"How is Mary?" Ned asked.

"Just fine," Tom answered. "She——"

The telephone interrupted him, and as he answered it he smiled and said:

"Ned's here, Mary. He was just asking me how you are, so I'll let you tell him yourself. Yes, I'll slip out while you're doing that and see when the House will be ready."

Work at repairing the damage done by the fireworks explosion had been proceeding on the House on Wheels while Tom was busy with the *Silver Cloud*.

"Keep Mary there until I come back," Tom said to his friend, as he turned the telephone over to him and went out to the building where the House was being renovated.

"Hear you're going to Mt. Camon," Ned said to Mary.

"Oh, yes. Don't you wish you were coming?"

"Indeed, I do! But I'm too busy. What sort of place is it up there?"

"Oh, wild scenery, mountains, great stretches of uncleared woods—quite isolated, in short."

"Good place for a honeymoon then, or is yours over?"

"Indeed it isn't!" laughed Mary. "Tom is wonderful!"

"Well, I'll let you talk to the wonderful man," chuckled Ned, as he gave the phone to Tom who hurried in. There was a rather serious look

on the young inventor's face as he spoke to his wife and said:

"I'm sorry, Mary; but it will have to be postponed."

"What, Tom?"

"Our trip to Mt. Camon."

"Oh! Why?"

"The House is worse damaged than I had any idea of and it will take at least a month, maybe more, to get it in shape to use. I'm sorry!"

"Oh, well, let's go by airship, Tom. In the new, big dirigible."

"That will hardly be ready, either. We'll have to make some other plans, my dear. I'll be home soon, and we'll talk it over. Bring Ned to dinner? Why, of course. How about it?" he looked away to ask his chum.

"I'm on," Ned answered.

There was a little more talk between Tom and his wife and as he hung up the receiver Eradicate, the aged colored man who now did nothing much but look after Mr. Swift, shuffled into the office with a look of concern on his face.

"What's the matter, Rad?" asked Tom jokingly. "Have you and Koku been having another run in?"

The giant and the Negro were always more or less at swords' points because of each one's devotion to the Swifts.

"No, sah, Massa Tom, 'tain't dat big, silly giant dis time!"

"What is it then? Are you mourning over your old mule Boomerang?"

"No, sah, 'tain't dat, Massa Tom. It's yo' pa!"

"Dad! What's the matter?" and Tom jumped to his feet.

"He's tuck mighty bad, dat's whut's de mattah," said Eradicate. "I didn't want him to come down heah to-day, but he did, an' now he's tuck bad! Yo' all better come an' see to him."

"Of course I'll come at once."

Tom hurried from his private office, followed by Ned, and hastened to that part of the plant where Mr. Swift had his own rooms, though he seldom came to them now.

"I hope nothing serious has happened!" mused Ned, as he followed his chum and the shuffling Eradicate.

CHAPTER IV

OFF TO MT. CAMON

SEVERAL thoughts were in the mind of Tom Swift as he hastened to see what had happened to his father, following the alarm of Eradicate. The colored man, kind and faithful as he was, did not seem to know anything more than that Mr. Swift was "tuck mighty bad."

"Poor dad is getting old," was one of Tom's thoughts. "I can see him failing. But maybe when I get him to Mt. Camon it will build him up. I'm glad I've got Mary, she'll look after him."

Then an ugly suspicion came into the mind of the young inventor. Like a flash which might have come from one of the skyrockets, Tom remembered the night he had brought home the fireworks and had felt a suspicion that he was being followed.

"Maybe," mused Tom, as he hurried on to his father's quarters, "some of the gangs that we put out of business in the past have come back to try their dirty work!"

The feeling that any one would dare attack his aged father sent a hot wave of resentment through Tom Swift and he clenched his hands as if eager to wreak vengeance on the scoundrels.

"But it couldn't have been that," Tom reasoned. "Eradicate wouldn't stand for anything of the sort. He'd even call in Koku, jealous as he is of the giant, before he'd let dad be hurt."

When Tom and Ned, with Eradicate shuffling in the rear, reached Mr. Swift's private workshop and laboratory, they found the aged inventor lying on a couch, pale and evidently weak, but showing no sign of injury.

"What's the matter, Dad?" asked Tom, hurrying over to kneel at his side.

"Oh, it isn't anything, really, Tom," was the answer in a low voice. "I just sort of keeled over."

"Dat's whut he done!" said Eradicate. "He were lookin' at some papers an' I were dustin' de bookcases an', all of a suddint like, I heahs him moan an' he were on de flo'. I picked him up an' ran to git yo' all, Massa Tom."

"That was the right thing to do. But what happened, Dad?"

"I guess I overdid myself a bit, and the weather is rather warm. I felt a bit faint and dizzy and then everything got black. The next I knew I

was on the couch and Rad was giving me some water."

"Dat's how it were," said the old colored man.

"But what made you keel over?" Tom wanted to know. "You didn't see anybody, did you?"

"What do you mean—'see anybody,' Tom?"

"I mean no one came in to attack you."

"Of course not," and Mr. Swift smiled a little. "Who would attack me?"

"Oh, maybe some of our old enemies."

"No, Tom, no one came in except Mr. Jardine. By the way, he seemed in a hurry for some calculations that must be made before we can finish the big dirigible, so I offered to make them for him, as he said you were too busy."

"That's nervy on his part!" exclaimed Tom. "He should let you alone, Dad. I can manage this end of the business."

"Oh, he meant no harm, Tom. And you know the calculations used to be my greatest strength. But I guess I'm getting old," and Mr. Swift spoke sadly.

"You're a lot younger than most men of your age," said Ned.

"Of course," Tom agreed, looking about the room. In spite of what his father had said, Tom had not given over his suspicions. But there were no signs of any intruder and Mr. Swift bore no

marks of any wound. It must have been too much concentration over intricate mathematical formulae that had caused the aged inventor to faint —that and the hot weather.

He was soon himself again, and wanted to go on with his work, but Tom insisted that he at once go home and took him up to the house, in company with Ned, in the electric runabout.

"Is anything the matter?" cried Tom's wife, when she saw him come home from the shop at this unusual hour.

"Nothing serious, Mary," he replied. "Dad is a little under the weather. He needs looking after, I guess. I'll leave him with you and Mrs. Baggert."

"I couldn't be in better hands," said the old gentleman, with a kind smile and glance at his son's pretty young wife.

In spite of Mr. Swift's assertions that he felt "fine," Tom insisted on sending for the nearest doctor, who, after looking his patient over, announced:

"He needs rest, quiet, and freedom from work, worry, and excitement for a while."

"I thought of taking him to Mt. Camon," announced Tom.

"When?" the doctor wanted to know.

"In a few days I had hoped, but my plans are rather upset because a certain car I wanted to use will have to be repaired."

"I wouldn't move Mr. Swift for a while yet," the physician went on. And when he said that Tom felt the case to be rather serious. "Just let him rest here. Later, perhaps in the fall, you can go to Mt. Camon."

"That will be all right," Mary said. "It's lovely up there in the fall, Tom. Anyhow, if we can't use the House on Wheels for a while it's just as well to wait."

"I guess we'll have to wait for the House to be repaired," Tom said. "But that's no reason for not going to Mt. Camon. I can use any other machine, or even a plane."

"I wouldn't take your father in an airplane if I were you," said the medical man, and his voice was rather serious. "Wait until fall and then go in that House you speak of. It will be cooler then. I'm sure that by September or October he will be all right."

It seemed the only thing to do, and so it was decided, though Tom Swift hated to disappoint his wife and her parents. But the Nestors, when telephoned to about the change of plans, said it suited them, as Mr. and Mrs. Nestor wanted to go to the seashore for a time.

"Then you go with them, Mary," Tom urged. "When you come back dad will be all right and we can go to Mt. Camon together."

"No," said Mary in a low voice.

"Why not?" asked Tom.

"Because," was all she said aloud, but as he leaned over to kiss her she whispered: "I don't want to leave you, my dear."

"Ahem!" exclaimed Ned Newton loudly, as he unexpectedly started to enter the room as Tom was kissing his wife. "I beg your pardon!"

"Oh, come on in!" chuckled Tom. "Well, I guess I'll have more time to rush work on the big dirigible," he added, for Ned had been out of the room during the talk by which the decision was reached.

"Maybe it's all for the best," Ned went on after he had been told the situation. "I know, Mary, if Tom went to Mt. Camon with you, leaving a half-finished dirigible in the shop, you wouldn't have a good time. He'd be thinking of nothing but motors, oralum plates, and so on."

"I know it," said the girl, with a laugh. "It will be a lot nicer in the fall. The forest is lovely then and the woods about the Mt. Camon hotel extend for miles and miles without a break."

So the mountain trip was postponed until autumn and, meanwhile, Tom Swift worked busily on the *Silver Cloud*. Mr. Swift was under strict orders to remain at home and not go near the shop, and Martin Jardine was as strictly forbidden to see the aged inventor.

"But I don't want this to be delayed!" he said

to Tom, nervously pacing up and down the office, alternately puffing at and relighting one of his strong cigars.

"There will be no delay," Tom promised. "I expect to work the men in a double shift beginning next week, and if you keep rushing the oralum plates to me I'll guarantee to deliver the ship on time."

"Good!" exclaimed Mr. Jardine. "Have a cigar! Oh, I forgot, you don't use tobacco. Well, give it to your father," and, thrusting it into Tom's hand, the nervous man hurried away.

"I wonder if it's real or if he's putting on," thought Tom, as he put the cigar on his desk. "Maybe Ned was right about him. But, anyhow, we're getting the cash so far. He's keeping up his payments."

The weeks passed and the *Silver Cloud* was fast approaching completion. Even Mr. Jardine was satisfied. Then came a spell of hot weather and Tom saw that his father was suffering from it. Mary, too, though saying nothing, missed her usual summer vacation at some mountain or shore resort.

Then Tom Swift came to a sudden decision. The work on the big dirigible was well under way and the House on Wheels had been repaired and renovated.

"We'll go to Mt. Camon at once if you say so," Tom told his wife one evening.

"Oh, Tom, can we?"

"Of course. Dr. Potter said dad could stand the trip now, and your mother and father are back from the shore. We'll start to-morrow if you want and can get ready."

"Of course I can. But what about your work—I mean on the big, new airship?"

"That will go along all right. Garret Jackson and Ned will be on the job until I get back. I can start for Mt. Camon to-morrow if you and your father and mother can."

They did this, making an early start before the usual morning visit of Mr. Jardine to the plant. This would forestall any nervous objection on his part to Tom's going away for a few days. The young inventor intended to leave his father, his wife, and her parents at the mountain hotel and return to the works to finish the *Silver Cloud*. As a matter of fact, the labor was so far along that Mr. Jardine really had no occasion to find fault. But he was so fussy he might do so.

The House on Wheels was a delightful vehicle in which to travel, and made its owner independent of hotels along the way.

Mt. Camon was the summit of a series of big hills, about two days' journey by automobile from Shopton. It was in a wild region of forests and

there was no other resort near the one Tom's wife and her parents had picked out for their fall sojourn.

"I wish you could stay with us and didn't have to go back, Tom," said Mary, as she sat beside him on the front seat of the House on Wheels, Tom doing the driving. His father and Mr. and Mrs. Nestor were within.

"I wish I didn't, myself," Tom answered. "But I have to. I have signed a contract to finish the *Silver Cloud* for the Jardine company and I must keep my word."

"Of course. But you'll come back as soon as you can, won't you?"

Tom Swift did not answer, and Mary looked at him for a reason. They were proceeding along a road that bordered part of the big Swift plant and Tom's eyes were fixed on a man he saw digging a hole, apparently in order to crawl under the fence.

"What's he up to, I wonder?" muttered the young inventor, as he guided the big car toward the intruder who was evidently seeking a surreptitious entrance. "Hey, you!" Tom Swift called. "Snap out of that!"

CHAPTER V

THE STRANGE DWARF

WITH a suddenness that showed how completely he had been taken by surprise, the figure that had been burrowing under the fence slipped from the hole partly dug beneath the barrier and stood upright at the side of the road.

"Why, Tom, he's only a boy!" exclaimed Mary. "Look!" and she gazed a little reproachfully at her husband because of the rather harsh words he had used toward the intruder.

"A boy!" exclaimed the young inventor.

"Yes," answered Mary. "He probably lost a ball over your big fence and he wanted to crawl under to get it."

"If he's a boy, I'm an infant in arms," chuckled Tom. "His ball days were over long ago. There's something queer going on here," he said in a lower voice. "That's a dwarf, Mary. A man dwarf!"

Then Mary saw that, indeed, this was so. The fellow was a dwarf, and not a pleasant one, either.

"What's the game?" asked Tom, as the short, squatty fellow, powerful in build, but only a boy in height, waddled, rather than walked, toward the House on Wheels.

"Game?" questioned the dwarf in surly tones. "I wasn't playing any game."

"It looked so," went on Tom. "Why were you trying to crawl under the fence? There's no game inside there, and if you lost your golf ball you'll have to let it go. What's the idea?"

"Do I have to tell you?" The dwarf's voice was surly.

"Well, seeing that this is my place and my fence, I don't think it's out of order to ask why you're burrowing under it," and Tom let a note of sarcasm inject itself.

"Oh, you're Mr. Swift, are you?" and the manner of the dwarf changed as if by magic. "Well, I beg your pardon. I have a message for you."

"A message for me?" exclaimed Tom, in surprise.

"Yes, a letter."

"Well, the least I can say is that this is a queer way to deliver it. Why didn't you go around to the entrance and see the watchman? Where is this letter?"

Tom's voice showed his disbelief. The stopping of the House on Wheels and the talk had brought

Mr. Swift and the Nestors from where they were conversing on the rear observation platform to the little vestibule behind the front seat where Tom and Mary rode.

"What is it, Tom?" asked his father.

"I found this—this man trying to get under our fence," the young inventor answered. "He says he was coming in to hand me a letter. But——"

"And here's the letter, Mr. Swift," the dwarf broke in, waddling closer to the auto and reaching up with an envelope in his hand. He was not tall enough, and Tom could not stoop low enough to get the missive, so the young inventor descended from his seat, first making sure that there was no chance for an ambush.

For Tom Swift had a distinctly unpleasant feeling, one not unmixed with apprehension, at the sight of the dwarf, a feeling which was increased by what the fellow was doing and his surly manner. This, coupled with Ned Newton's suspicion of Martin Jardine, made Tom careful.

More than once in the past some clever tricks had been worked against Tom Swift and his father, and he was well aware that all their enemies were not disposed of. This dwarf, however, was a new one.

To Tom's surprise, the letter was not only addressed to him, but was in an envelope bearing

the imprint of the Jardine company which had its headquarters in a large city not far off.

"Read it," urged the dwarf, with what passed for a smile on his queer face, a man's face on a boy's body.

"All right," Tom assented, after turning the missive over. The envelope contained but a single sheet of paper and a hasty look at the bottom showed that it was signed by Martin Jardine. The letter said:

"Dear Mr. Swift: This will introduce to you a very clever little man—a dwarf as you will see —by name James Chock. I have known him for some time. I think you will find him very useful when you get to flying the *Silver Cloud*. Jim, as I call him, is very powerful, but small. He can get into the tight corners of the dirigible and be of service in that way in case we have to make repairs when sailing. I am sending him to you with the suggestion that you hire him and keep him until we are ready to get in the air. Then make him a member of the crew. You will find him rather eccentric but reliable. He is a great contrast to your giant Koku, isn't he?"

Tom read the letter twice, and then said:

"Humph!"

"Is it all right, dear?" asked Mary anxiously.

"Seems to be," Tom answered, as he passed the letter to his father. Then addressing the dwarf he said:

"I certainly didn't intend to speak harshly to you, Mr. Chock——"

"Call me Jim. Everybody does," interrupted the dwarf, with one of his grotesque smiles. "You won't hurt my feelings. But you did give me a start."

"And you greatly surprised me by burrowing under my fence," Tom said more genially. "What's the idea? Why didn't you go around to the gate and hand in this letter for me?"

"Too far," said the dwarf, with an uncanny chuckle. "My legs are short and it takes me twice as long to walk a mile as it would you. I didn't want to go all the way around to the gate, so I started to crawl under your fence. I didn't think there was any harm."

"There might have been some harm to you," Tom stated rather grimly. "Usually both the upper and lower edges of my fence are guarded by a wire carrying a heavy charge of electricity. It just happens the juice is off now, or you might have been tied in a double bowknot as you dug under."

"I'm glad I wasn't!" chuckled the dwarf. "I can't stand being shrunk any more. But I didn't mean any harm. I was taking the shortest way on

account of my legs. I couldn't climb over your fence, Mr. Swift, so I had to go under. Excuse me!"

"All right," Tom said. "You seem to have the proper credentials. What about it, Dad?" he asked his father, who had read the note.

"Well," said Mr. Swift, "this is up to Jardine. If he wants this little man aboard the craft he is paying for, I don't see that we can object. As he says in the letter, this Mr. Chock may be useful getting into corners. Send him on to the works, Tom. But," he added in a low voice, "send word to have him watched. Don't take any chances."

"I won't," said Tom, in a voice equally low. Then to the dwarf he said: "All right, Jim. Take this letter to Mr. Jackson. He's my foreman. Tell him I've seen it."

"You'd better make an endorsement on the note to that effect, Mr. Swift," said the dwarf, thus showing he had some business sense. "Mr. Jackson might not take my word that you had seen me and had read Mr. Jardine's note. Especially if any of your men see me crawling in under the fence."

"I wouldn't go in that way if I were you," and Tom spoke gravely. "Go around by the main gate. I'll write a line on this note. By the way, where is Mr. Jardine? I haven't seen him these last two days."

"He's very busy," the dwarf said. "That's why he sent me with this note instead of bringing me around personally. I have worked in his oralum factory," he said. "I'm a good machinist and I can get in places other men can't."

"That's so," admitted Tom, writing a brief note to his foreman on the back of Jardine's letter. "Well, you may be of use to us. But next time please don't come in like a boy under a fence at a ball game. It's rather unusual and may be dangerous."

"I like to do unusual things," chuckled the dwarf in a rather strange voice—a man's tones coming from a child's body. "But it's a long way around to your front gate," he said, rather wistfully.

"Oh, Tom, don't make him walk all the way back," urged Mary, in a low voice. "It's such a hot day and so far. We aren't in any hurry. Turn the House back!"

"Well," Tom began, "I suppose——" Just then he saw a flivver containing one of his workmen who had been to the neighboring city of Mansburg for some supplies coming down the road. The workman was on his way back to the factory.

"Here, Kelly, take Mr. Chock to the works with you," Tom requested, halting his man. "He has a letter for Mr. Jackson."

"All right, Mr. Swift," Kelly answered. "Hop

in, son," he went on, evidently thinking the dwarf was a boy. "Oh!" he exclaimed, when he saw his mistake.

"All right, Kelly, step on it!" chuckled the uncanny little fellow, as he scrambled nimbly up to a seat beside the workman. With a farewell wave of his hand containing the endorsed letter of introduction he was off down the road, calling back:

"See you later, Mr. Swift!"

"That's rather a queer proceeding," remarked Mr. Nestor.

"A little too queer," commented Tom. "But maybe it's all right."

"Poor fellow!" murmured Mary. "It must be hard to go through life as he is."

"He seemed jolly enough," Mrs. Nestor said. "I think he could make money in a circus."

"Do you think that letter was genuine, Tom?" asked his father.

"Oh, yes. It was Jardine's signature, and we can easily check up on it. I'll get word to Jackson before that dwarf arrives."

"Are you going back, Tom?" Mary asked.

"No," the young inventor answered. "I can telephone to him from here." He went to a place in the high fence where there was a telephone outlet. This was one of several in the barrier about the Swift plant. Tom carried a portable telephone

in his House on Wheels and he was soon in communication with Mr. Jackson, telling him of the occurrence.

"Put the dwarf to work, but watch him," was Tom's final instruction. "I'll be back in a few days."

"All right, Mr. Swift," the foreman said. "Kelly hasn't come in yet with this bird you speak of, but I'll be on the watch. Don't worry."

Nevertheless, Tom Swift did worry a bit. It seemed very strange that Martin Jardine would send such a dwarf to be taken up in *Silver Cloud* when that great dirigible should be ready to sail. Yet there was reason in the request.

"Only I didn't like his crawling under the fence," Tom said, as he talked his doubts over with Mary and the others while they journeyed along in the House on Wheels.

"Oh, I think he showed good sense," Mary said. "He knew he had a proper letter of introduction and that everything was in order."

"If the current had been on the lower wire," remarked Tom grimly, "everything would have been in disorder for a while. Well, maybe it's all right. I'll see Jardine when I get back and make sure."

"Aren't you going to stay with us at Mt. Camon, Tom?" asked Mrs. Nestor.

"Only a few days this time," was the answer.

"I must get back and rush work on the dirigible. After that is finished I'll spend the rest of the summer up there resting."

"It will be lovely," Mary said, leaning against him as he drove the big car rapidly over the road.

They stopped for lunch at a pretty little tea room, for, though they could well have cooked in the House on Wheels, for they had supplies with them, it was decided not to take the time to do their own cooking just now. After a rest, they went on again, planning to stop at a hotel if night found them near one, or if not, to camp out in the House on Wheels, which was equipped with comfortable beds.

The afternoon was drawing to a close, and they were some miles from a city where they might stop if they wished when, as they went around a turn in the road, they saw just ahead of them a small auto van which had come to grief.

The van, built on the chassis of a flivver, was turned on its side. Standing looking at it were a man and a woman, both young and evidently Italians. The man, with a gesture of despair as Tom and his friends approached, said pathetically:

"Well, Maria, this is the end!"

"So it seems, Pietro," said the woman, or rather, girl, for she was no older than Tom's wife. "Oh, what are we to do?" There were tears in her

voice and tears in her eyes as Tom Swift and his friends plainly saw when the House on Wheels was stopped opposite the overturned van.

"What's the matter?" Tom asked. "You've had an accident—I can see that," he went on. "Is anybody hurt?"

"I am much afraid so," answered the man. "All my poor children are in there, and I much fear that some have been crushed!"

"Oh, how terrible!" cried Mary.

"Come on, Dad! Mr. Nestor! We've got to help those children!" cried Tom, springing from his seat, followed by the two men.

CHAPTER VI

A MERRY PARTY

TOM SWIFT caught hold of one edge of the overturned van and started to right it. At the same time he called out:

"Take hold here alongside of me, Dad! You too, Mr. Nestor! You lift over there, Mr. Pietro," he added to the Italian standing beside the weeping young woman.

"Pardon, my name is Notine—Pietro Notine," said the foreigner, with a smile that showed his white, even teeth. "And there is no need to be in such a rush. I thank you kindly for your offer. But I think if you have a lifting jack it will be better so to raise my car."

"Get out a jack when the poor children are crushed inside?" cried Tom. "What's the matter with you? Get hold here, everybody! Maybe you can help a little, Mary, and you too, Mrs. Nestor! And if your wife——"

Tom paused questioningly and eased his lifting efforts for a moment.

"Yes, Maria is my wife," said Pietro Notine. "But, a thousand pardons, my kind friend, there is no need to so rapidly exert yourself. The damage is done!"

"You must be crazy!" cried Tom. "Children crushed in there and you want to wait!"

"Oh, Pietro, there you do it again!" cried the young woman, suddenly drying her eyes and smiling. "I told you everybody doesn't understand your poetical talk. Calling them children!"

"Why, aren't there children in that wreck?" asked Tom, hardly knowing what to think.

"I call them my children," said the Italian man, with a sigh.

"But they are only marionettes—animated dolls that we use in giving our plays," explained the young woman.

"Marionettes?" murmured Tom Swift.

"Plays! Oh, how lovely!" exclaimed his wife.

"Animated dolls!" ejaculated Mr. Nestor.

"Like Punch and Judy, I suppose?" asked Mrs. Nestor.

"Somewhat, and yet different," explained Mrs. Notine. "We like to think our marionettes are different from dear Mr. Punch."

"Oh, but my dear children are all killed, I know!" sighed the Italian. "It was such a crash!"

"Look here! Let me get this right!" said Tom, desisting from his efforts to right the van. "Do

you travel about giving Punch and—I mean marionette shows?" he asked, for he knew the difference between the two performances.

"That's it!" exclaimed Mr. Notine, who was peering first into one end of his overturned van and then the other. "I am sorry if I unduly alarmed you by calling the marionettes my children. But they are very dear to me. I made them—every one—with the help of my wife. Now—alas!"

"But, Pietro dear," murmured his wife, "they may not be as badly damaged as you fear. I am sure if these kind people will help us right the van we may save something and be able to give our show."

"Of course we'll help you get things to rights!" exclaimed Tom. "I don't believe your chariot is badly damaged," he went on, looking with critical eyes at the overturned flivver. "These busses can stand a lot of punishment. How did it happen?"

"I turned to one side quickly, to avoid running over a dog," explained the Italian puppet master. "Then—poof—over we went! Oh, what a crash for my poor children! We jumped and saved ourselves. But——"

"Do not grieve, my dear!" cried his wife, putting her arms around him like a mother.

"Tom, aren't they dear?" whispered Mary. "We must help them!"

"Of course," he responded.

Then, when the traveling show people were calmer and a survey had been made of the situation, Tom Swift saw that it would be very easy for him to attach a rope to the top of the van and pull it back on its wheels, for the road here was very wide.

"I'll soon have you in shape," the young inventor told Mr. Notine. "Mr. Nestor, will you lend a hand?"

"Of course, Tom."

"Count me in!" cried Mr. Swift.

"You'd better take it easy, Dad," Tom said. But his father insisted on doing at least some of the lighter tasks, and in a short time, with the pull exerted by the powerful House on Wheels, the marionette van was righted, little the worse for its mishap.

Mary murmured in delight when she saw that the van was like a little traveling theater—in effect a glorified Punch and Judy show. The sides of the van opened outward, a little stage was made, and from behind it the Italian and his wife could manipulate the strings that worked the puppets, or animated dolls.

"Ah, my dear children! My little ones!" murmured the Italian when the van was righted and he delved into its interior. He came out with several long, calico bags, their necks tied with

strings. From each bag stuck out a curious wooden contrivance with many black strings wound about it.

"Try some of them, Pietro, and see if they are damaged," suggested his wife. "I think most of them are all right."

"May the good fairies grant it!" murmured the puppet master. He whisked off the calico bag from a grotesque figure representing a clown, and in a trice he had stepped into his van, behind some scenery representing a forest. Then, to the wondering eyes of Tom, Mary, and the others, the clown with its painted wooden face seemed to come to life, dancing about, cutting up antics, while the puppet master's voice came out with such effect that it seemed the clown was speaking.

"Oh, how wonderful!" cried Mary.

"Clever!" murmured Tom.

"Where are you going to give a show?" asked Mrs. Nestor. "I should like to see it."

"We planned to exhibit at the hotel in Colchester," said Mrs. Notine. "But if our car is so damaged that it cannot go on——" she paused, and made a gesture of resignation.

"We've going to Colchester," Tom said. "If your machine won't go I'll either make it go or take you there in ours."

"It is kind of you," the Italian said. "But I need my scenery, my effects, and——"

"Perhaps our van will go on, though," interrupted his wife, more hopefully.

"That's the way to talk!" cried Tom. "I'll have a look, and we'll give it a trial."

So while the Italian puppet master examined his characters, which is to say his various marionettes, Tom went over the mechanism of the van. He found that a few broken wires of the ignition system constituted the total damage, except for some scratches, and he soon had the car in working order.

"A thousand thanks!" exclaimed the enthusiastic Mr. Notine. "Now we can go on!"

"It was wonderful of you!" murmured the pretty Italian woman. And she made such "eyes" at Tom that later Mary laughingly said she would soon have been jealous.

"I should like very much to see a marionette show," said Mrs. Nestor.

"Nothing is easier," returned Tom. "We planned at least to call at the Colchester hotel, for I told Mr. Jackson if he had any messages he could reach me there. So we'll stop, anyhow, and if you like you can spend the night there and see this performance."

So it was arranged, and after Tom Swift and his party had seen the marionette van start off, they followed in the House on Wheels and both soon arrived at Colchester. The House on Wheels

was put in a garage for the night and the hotel proprietor warmly welcomed the traveling marionette company to his establishment. He was in need of a night's entertainment for his guests, and a good crowd was assured. For be it known that marionettes are as much a source of amusement to adults as they are to children. The plays Mr. Notine and his wife gave with the puppets were poetical and historical and not juvenile plays.

So it was a merry party that gathered in the hotel parlor that evening to watch the marionette show, a temporary stage having been set up and the scenery and effects brought in from the van.

Tom was thoroughly enjoying himself and so was his wife. There was plenty of applause for the marionette show and its picturesque proprietors, and a goodly sum was realized for their benefit.

After the show there was a jolly gathering about the Italian and his wife, and they made much of the "rescue," as Pietro Notine termed it, on the part of Tom Swift.

"Without my benefactor I should never be here!" said the Italian, with dramatic gestures.

"Oh, cut it out!" chuckled Tom.

The hotel guests were examining the workings of the marionettes from "behind the scenes," and Mary, who had met a few acquaintances

among the persons in the audience, was talking and laughing with them when a bellboy came along calling:

"Telegram! Telegram for Mr. Swift!"

"Here!" exclaimed Tom, slipping the lad a quarter.

"Oh," murmured Mary, as her husband tore open the yellow envelope, "I hope there is no bad news."

CHAPTER VII

THE LANDSLIDE

LITTLE could be gathered from the expression on Tom Swift's face as to the import of the telegraph message he hurriedly read. But then the young inventor was accustomed to concealing his feelings.

"Tom has a regular sphinx face," Ned Newton used to say.

However, schooled as Tom was in the art of hiding his emotion when necessary, it was evident to Mary, at least, that the telegram contained news of importance, if not of trouble.

"I didn't know Tom expected any messages here," said Mrs. Nestor, as she and her husband stood among the hotel guests that were marveling at the clever ability shown by the marionette performer and his wife.

"Tom always leaves word at the shop where he can be found," said Mr. Swift, as his son was conversing in a low tone with his wife. "So whether he is here or there they can always communicate with him."

"They couldn't do it very well when Tom was on some of his submarine trips," suggested Mrs. Nestor, with a smile.

"They did when we were wrecked on Earthquake Island," her husband answered, with a chuckle. "Don't you remember how Tom rigged up a machine and sent a wireless message that brought us help?" he asked.

"So he did!" agreed Mary's mother. "But I wonder what's the matter now?"

"Anything wrong, Tom?" asked his father, with the privilege his relationship entailed.

"Not so much wrong, as a puzzle," and Tom laughed a little, but uneasily. "It's that dwarf, Chock," he added.

"What did he do?" asked Mr. Swift quickly.

"Did he try to wreck the dirigible?" Mary wanted to know. For in times past she knew unscrupulous enemies had taken even such desperate methods as this to cripple Tom Swift.

"It isn't so much what he did as what he didn't do," said Tom. "He didn't stay—quit suddenly, Mr. Jackson wires me. It looks a bit queer, after he made such an effort to get in the plant."

"What do you think it means?" Tom's father asked.

"I don't know, Dad."

"Did he take away any of your things—I mean

secret plans or anything having to do with the dirigible?"

"I think not, or Jackson would have said so. But I'll get him on the long distance wire and find out."

A little later Tom was talking to his foreman over the telephone and later still the young inventor told his father the details.

"Queerly enough, it was Koku and the dwarf that clashed," Tom said. "My giant made such fun of the little man that Jackson says Chock flew into a rage, tried to beat Koku up, got well threshed for his pains, and then quit in a fit of temper."

"I don't know that you can blame him," remarked Mr. Nestor. "Small people are more touchy about their size than big ones."

"But is everything all right at the plant, Tom?" Mr. Swift asked, and it was evident that he was nervously apprehensive.

"Everything is all right as far as they can tell. As I warned Jackson, they kept a careful watch over the dwarf, though not letting him suspect it. In spite of Jardine's letter of introduction, I was suspicious. However, I don't believe he got a chance to do anything or take anything. He just left because Koku got on his nerves, I guess. Well, I'm glad it was no worse."

"I am, too," Mary said. "I'd hate to have any-

thing happen the big dirigible, Tom, after all your work."

"Oh, well, we can't always have good luck," Tom said, with a smile. "And now you must be tired, Mary. What about going upstairs?"

"Yes, it has been rather an exciting day, what with thinking we had come upon an overturned van of children," and Mary laughed a little at the recollection of the marionettes.

"Neat little show he has," commented Tom. "I'm glad we could help them. They're going to travel in their van until cold weather sets in, so Notine told me. Then they go about in different theaters on a vaudeville circuit. Well, by this time to-morrow we ought to be at Mt. Camon."

"I shall love it there," Mary said, as she and Tom went up in the hotel elevator to their rooms. "Only I wish you could stay longer."

"I'll be with you as soon as I get this dirigible off my mind," he promised her.

When he had seen Mary safely settled in their quarters, Tom said he would go downstairs and look over the evening papers.

The marionette show had been put away, the guests who had gathered to witness the performance had dispersed, but Tom saw the poetical little Italian puppet master in the smoking room.

"Excuse me, Mr. Swift," said Pietro Notine, beckoning to Tom to enter and making room for

him on a leather settee. "Did I hear you speak of a certain dwarf named Chock?"

"Yes," Tom answered wonderingly. "I engaged a dwarf of that name early to-day for my plant on my way from home. But I just had a telegram from my shop superintendent saying that this evening he took French leave, so to speak—that is, he went away suddenly."

"I understand, Mr. Swift," said the Italian, and his voice was grave. "Perhaps it is as well for you that he did leave, and with no great harm to anything of yours, as I could not help overhearing you say to your friends."

"No, he didn't take anything or do any damage," Tom said. "But what do you mean that it is just as well he has left my plant? What do you know about this dwarf, Chock?"

"I know little good of him," was the earnest and almost whispered answer, as the Italian slid nearer to Tom along the settee. "You have been a good friend to me. Let me repay you in a small way, by advising you to have nothing to do with this dwarf!"

"You surprise me!" Tom said. "I had no idea you knew him. Can you tell me more?"

"Not much more, except to repeat my warning."

"How did you happen to know Chock? Do you know anything about why he went to my place

with a letter from a man I am building a big dirigible for?"

"I know nothing of your works, Mr. Swift. I have heard of you, but I never met you before. Only, if I had a place where ships of the air were made I would not let this dwarf come near them."

"Look here!" exclaimed Tom, hardly knowing whether or not to credit the Italian. "You've said either too much or too little. Tell me first how you know James Chock."

"He is a clever little dwarf," was the answer. "Clever, but of such a character as not to be trusted. He has exhibited himself in many theaters where my wife and I have also given our marionette shows."

"I thought he would make a good theater attraction," Tom said. "But do you know anything of him personally?"

"To my sorrow," replied the Italian. "I once engaged him, for, being small, I thought he could get around easily behind the scenery of our miniature stage where, as you have seen, we have little room to spare. For a time Chock did well and helped us. But in the end I had to discharge him for getting drunk, if you will excuse me, and one night he tried to set fire to my van and burn it with all my children!"

Tom knew now what the puppet master meant

by "children" and was not as shocked as he would have been at first. But he was sufficiently impressed as it was.

"You don't mean it!" he exclaimed.

"Truly, I am telling you," said Pietro Notine solemnly. "But for my wife's alertness, this dwarf would have destroyed all my marionettes. That is why I say he is vindictive, not to be trusted, and one who must be watched. You are well rid of him."

"I should say so!" murmured Tom. "I wonder if Jardine knows that? He recommended him. I must look farther into this. I'll write Jackson a letter and send it by the air mail so he'll be on the watch to-morrow. I don't want to get him out of bed to the telephone again. But I'm obliged to you for letting me know this, Mr. Notine."

"The obligation is still on my side," said the Italian, with a friendly smile and a characteristic gesture.

He and Tom sat up talking for half an hour longer, but the puppet master could tell little more of the dwarf than he had already disclosed.

"Only I beg of you to have nothing to do with him," he concluded.

"I should say not!" agreed Tom.

He wrote the letter to his foreman and went up to where Mary was sleepily awaiting him.

But he said nothing to her about what had been told him, for he did not want her to worry over what were as yet only rumor and suspicion, even though very disquieting ones.

"I guess the folks back at the plant can look after things until I return," Tom thought.

The puppet folks had departed next morning when Tom and his party were ready to resume their trip in the House on Wheels, and they were soon traveling along the road at a fast rate, hoping to reach Mt. Camon before nightfall.

But just after they left one city, after a bountiful lunch, they came upon a detour sign, and when they took the cut-off road it was soon evident that they were not going to make good time, for the highway was very rough. At last Tom, in despair, stopped at a crossroad hot-dog stand and asked the young fellow in charge whether there was any other route to Falkenberg, which was the town they must go through in order to get on the road to Mt. Camon.

"Why, yes," said the stand-keeper. "If you go back along this road to the last turn," and he indicated, "and bear to the right, you'll get on an old logging road that runs along the side of the cliff. That's a short cut, but it's a bad grade."

"I've yet to see the grade my machine won't take," Tom said. "But is it wide enough on the shoulder of the cliff?"

"Oh, yes, two cars can pass, even counting one as wide as yours," for Tom's House on Wheels was not small.

"Then I'm going to take that cut-off," Tom decided. "If we keep on this way it means another night at some hotel or sleeping in the House, and I want to get you settled, Dad, at the Mt. Camon hotel where you can rest."

So Tom swung his big machine off the detour and they were soon climbing up a fairly good road, one that was quite wide enough for any motorist, but with a very steep grade.

"She'd take it on high if I forced her," Tom said proudly as he guided the House around one turn after another. "But we don't need to. We'll soon be there now."

"I hope so," murmured Mary. "It seems dangerous."

Tom laughed at her fears, and went on and on and up and up. They reached the summit of the cut-off, and swung around a place where the descending road had been literally dug through a shoulder of a great hill, really a small mountain. Tom threw the motor into low gear, to save his brakes, and was congratulating himself on saving time and not meeting with any traffic when there was a sudden strange rumble and tremor behind him.

"What's that?" cried Mr. Nestor.

"Another car coming, I guess," Tom said. "Sounds like a big truck."

His father glanced back and cried:

"Tom, it's a landslide! This road is slipping away back of us and we're going down with it! It's a new road and hasn't been well settled. Look out for yourself, Tom!"

Alarmed by his father's excited voice and by a scream of fear from Mrs. Nestor, Tom shot a look back around the edge of the front seat. He saw great cracks appearing in the roadway over which he had just traveled. Looking ahead, he saw a big piece of the towering cliff above him break off and crash to the road in front with a thundering roar.

There was a sickening lurch, a swaying of the House on Wheels. As Mary gave a cry of alarm, the whole side of the mountain and Tom's great conveyance went down with the landslide.

CHAPTER VIII

MR. DAMON ARRIVES

"WHAT shall I do, Tom?" called Mary Swift in a tense voice into the ear of her husband beside whom she sat on the seat of the House on Wheels. "Is this the end?"

For it seemed that only death awaited them at the foot of the mountain down which they were sliding, beyond control, gripped in the mass of earth, trees, and rocks that formed the great slide.

"Sit still, Mary dear!" exclaimed Tom. He did not turn his eyes to look at her, much as he wished to, for he must keep a steady hand on the wheel and keep his eyes in front to avoid, if possible, crashing into some great boulder. He realized that he could still steer the House on Wheels, though to hold it back or send it forward out of danger on top of that slide was beyond human power.

"Don't fear for me. I'll sit still," Mary answered quietly and, white-lipped, she braced

herself on the seat, waiting for the great crash she expected to come at any moment.

Mrs. Nestor, clinging to her husband back in the big car, was terrified, and with reason; but she was a woman of great common sense and not panicky. Her experience on Earthquake Island with Tom Swift had taught her that he was to be relied upon in an emergency. So, though she clung to her husband and moaned a little, she did not try to leap out of a window or the door at the rear, as some might have done.

"Steady!" murmured Mr. Nestor, holding his wife to him. "If we are to come out of this alive, Tom Swift will accomplish it. If it is to be the end we must meet it bravely," he said, though there was a tremor in his voice as he looked at Mary sitting beside her husband.

"Tom, do you want any help?" asked his father. "I can do a lot yet."

"No. Stay where you are—all of you!" Tom called over his shoulder. "And keep to the rear as far as you can, to hold the back wheels down. If we don't up-end I think we'll be all right."

"What did the car do—leave the road?" asked Mr. Nestor.

They all had to shout to be heard above the rumble, roar, crash, clatter, bang, and rattle of the landslide.

"No, we didn't leave the road," Tom said

grimly. "The road tried to leave us and I'm not sure yet but what it may. But, so far, we have stuck together."

What had happened was that a section of the side of the mountain, into which the highway was cut, had suddenly broken off, either because of much rain or because there was a fault in the rock and earth of which it was composed. This big piece, weighing thousands of tons, had broken off the road itself, and the portion of the highway, on which the House on Wheels rested, began to slip down into the valley below. Fortunately, none of the falling earth, stones and trees had struck the big auto. But the House on Wheels was being carried down the slope as an integral part of the landslide, even as were some of the gigantic boulders and tall trees.

"Do you think we can come through it safely, Tom?" asked Mary softly, her face close against his shoulder.

"I think so—I hope so. Steady now! If we can get past that big rock I think we'll make it."

Ahead of them was a great boulder, as big, if not bigger, than the House on Wheels itself. It was moving more slowly than was Tom's car, for the reason that the latter had wheels.

Closer and closer to the great rock the House on Wheels slid. Tom was pulling with all his might on the steering wheel. Mary saw that he

was using his last ounce of strength, and she quickly put her hands beside his and helped him turn the front wheels, which were hard to move, in spite of being arranged on a gear, for they were now embedded deep in sand and gravel.

"Oh, we're going to hit!" cried Mrs. Nestor nervously.

"Pull, Mary!" shouted Tom.

The wheel slowly turned—oh, so slowly.

But when it seemed that there must be a crash, the great House slid past the immense rock and came to rest against a bank of sand in the valley below the broken road. The gigantic boulder rolled off to one side. The House on Wheels quivered and was still.

"Safe!" cried Mr. Nestor, looking out of a window as he gently released himself from his wife's arms.

"Safe, but stuck," murmured Tom, his hands white and tensed from the strain of pulling around the steering wheel. Mary sank against her husband limply, game but "all in," as she expressed it.

"What do you mean, 'stuck,' Tom?" asked his father.

"I mean we've run her nose into a sand bank. Nothing is broken, I think, but we'll have to be dug out before we can get back on the road. I guess it means staying here for the night."

"And we can be very thankful," said Mrs. Nestor, "that we have such a wonderful house to stay in, Tom Swift. You're a dear boy!" and she kissed him.

"Yes, we can put up at this hotel!" chuckled Mr. Nestor. "It will be rather fun, I think. For I'm a bit shaky and I'd just as soon stop where we are as fuss up for a regular hotel dining room."

Tom was out of the car looking around, over, and under it. He could see nothing wrong except that all four wheels were buried deep in sand, gravel, and rocks. The landslide had reached bottom, carrying the great car with it, but not damaging it.

"All right. Here's where we stay until I can get a gang of men with shovels in the morning to dig us out," Tom said. "It's lucky we have our beds and kitchen with us."

"Yes, and mother and I will get the meal!" offered Mary. "You're to do nothing but rest, Tom!"

"That won't be a bad idea!" he chuckled. Really the danger had been great and the strain on him terrific. For he thought that Mary and all of them would be killed, or at least badly hurt. But they were now safe and sound.

It did not take long to prepare the meal and get ready to spend the night. The car rested on

almost a level "keel," if that expression is permissible, and there was a little stream of clear, sparkling water in the valley where they had come to rest.

So they made not such a bad night of it after all, as the beds, though small, were comfortable. Tom soon recovered his nerve, but he was more than a little anxious, though he did not say so, about the grotesque dwarf and what he had heard about him from Mr. Notine.

"I wonder if Jardine is playing some game," mused Tom, as he fell asleep. "Well, I'll find out when I get back home."

The next day when men from the state highway department came out to investigate the landslide, they were much surprised to see the big House on Wheels standing where it had been caught in the slipping earth.

"That road around the cliff wasn't supposed to be used," one of the engineers said to Tom. "How'd you come to take it?"

"A young fellow at a hot-dog stand told me it was a short cut. But this was a little too short," and Tom glanced significantly up the side of the mountain down which they had literally slid.

"I should say so!" remarked the engineer. "Well, we'll dig you out and then I'll have a talk with that lad. He might have sent you all to your deaths."

"I wondered why we didn't meet other cars," Tom said.

It did not take long to dig out the House, though afterward it had to proceed slowly over rough ground to get back to a hard road. But after all no great damage was done, proving that when Tom Swift built a machine he built it well.

A little later they were well on their road to the great hotel in the big woods of Mt. Camon and reached their stopping place before noon.

"Isn't this a wonderful hotel, Tom?" cried Mary, when the car had been run around to a garage and they were being shown to their rooms.

"Great!" he said. "I didn't know there were so many trees in the world!"

The Mt. Camon Hotel was situated on a mountain top, girt around by immense forest stretches in every direction.

"I am glad you like it here," said Mr. Thorndyke, the hotel manager, as he greeted the Nestors, who had been his guests many seasons. "The only thing is that we are very dry up here."

"We're all prohibitionists, so we won't mind that," laughed Tom.

"You mistake me," said Mr. Thorndyke, with a smile. "I mean we have had no rain for a long time. It is that dryness I mean."

"Is the hotel water supply running low?" Tom

asked. He knew what a shortage like that meant in the height of the season.

"Not that," the manager said. "We have our own artesian well that never goes dry. But all about us the forests are like tinder. It is feared that if there are forest fires they may get beyond control. The fire wardens are worried and are constantly on the alert."

"Let us hope that doesn't happen," Tom said, lightly enough. "And it may rain."

"It may. I hope so," said Mr. Thorndyke but he had a worried air.

However, Tom, Mary and the others had come to Mt. Camon for a good time and such a thing as a dry spell was not going to spoil their vacation. So they got settled in their rooms, Mary saw that her mother and father and Mr. Swift were comfortable, then she took Tom out to show him around the place, for she had spent many summers there.

"I suppose," said Tom, rather jokingly, "that you will take me to Bridal Veil Falls, Lovers' Leap, the Maiden's Retreat, and all sorts of places like that."

"We have them all!" laughed Mary. "But I do hope the dry weather hasn't spoiled the flower gardens. They are, or were when I was last here, quite a feature of this hotel. Let's go out and look."

They went through the main entrance, out on a broad piazza, and started down the long walk that led up to the hotel from the road. On either side were beds of flowers, plants, and shrubs, and Tom was beginning to admire them.

"Oh, this isn't what I want to show you yet," said Mary. "Come over this way."

She led him through a path of shrubbery. Just ahead of them were two men, one evidently a gardener. The figure of the other was familiar to Tom Swift. Then he heard a well known voice say:

"Bless my watering can, but those are the finest roses I ever saw! I must have one!"

He reached over to pick a blossom.

"Mr. Damon!" cried Tom in delight.

"Tom Swift!" ejaculated the other, turning about. "When did you get here?"

"Just arrived," Tom answered. "But I never expected to see you. When did you come?"

"I just arrived, too. The bus brought me here from that little jerkwater station shaped like a mushroom. But see these flowers! In spite of the dry spell this fellow has made them bloom," and he motioned to the gardener standing beside him.

Mr. Damon reached over again to pick a rose. As he did so, the man beside him, with a cry like that of a wild animal, shouted:

"No! You must not! I forbid you!"

"My man, you forget yourself!" said Mr. Damon severely. "I have been a guest here before and I know it is allowed to pick a few flowers. Stand aside!" for the man, with a face showing rage, seemed about to prevent him.

"No! No! You must not pick that rose!" cried the man, and he raised his hand as if to strike Mr. Damon. But that eccentric character was very quick, and a moment later the gardener went flying backward into some bushes, propelled by the vigorous fist of Wakefield Damon.

CHAPTER IX

A FLASHING KNIFE

"THERE!" exclaimed Mr. Damon with a grunt of satisfaction, as he straightened up. "Bless my golf clubs, but I think I've taught that insolent fellow a lesson!"

"What's it all about?" asked Tom, greatly surprised by this scene.

"Oh, he's a crank about flowers, that's all," Mr. Damon said. "But I have never known him to go to such lengths before."

"Did he hurt you?" asked Mary anxiously, for she was very fond of Mr. Damon, as was Tom, in spite of his odd ways.

"Not at all, my dear," answered the eccentric man. "I hit him first."

"And, speaking of golf," said Tom, "you seem to have made a hole in one, Mr. Damon."

"What do you mean, Tom?"

The young inventor smiled and pointed to the gardener who was getting up out of a hole beneath the bushes into which Mr. Damon had

knocked him. There was a strange, strained look on the man's face, but he said nothing nor did he attempt to renew the quarrel. He dusted himself off, looked at some scratches on his hands, glanced once at Mr. Damon, and went away.

"You had better look out for him, Mr. Damon," Tom warned. "He had an ugly look."

"I know him of old," was the answer. "He is very jealous of his flowers, but Mr. Thorndyke has said that we guests may pick a few when we please. I shall speak to the manager about this fellow. But, Tom, I am delighted to see you and Mary here. How did it happen?"

"The folks needed a rest and change, particularly dad," Tom explained. "So I brought them up in the House on Wheels."

"And we came nearly not getting here," added Mary.

"How was that, my dear?"

"We were caught in a landslide."

"Bless my toothbrush!" cried Mr. Damon. "You don't tell me!"

Then Tom related some of the events leading up to the visit to Mt. Camon. In turn, Mr. Damon stated that his wife had gone to visit some of her relatives, and he not fancying a trip to the little town where they lived, had come by himself to the mountain resort.

"We will have a good time while you are here,

Tom," said the odd character. "Bless my first base, but we must get up a ball game! They have a very good diamond here. We married men will play the single men, and you'll have to be in the former class now, Tom."

"That's right, Mr. Damon, and I'm not sorry!" laughed Tom, with a fond look at his wife.

"She can play tennis," went on Mr. Damon. "They have some fine courts here."

"Indeed they have," said Mary. "I've played here before. Is there a good crowd up this season, Mr. Damon?"

"Well, really, my dear, I don't know. I arrived only a little while ago, like yourselves. But from what I have seen I should say it was going to be a good season. Are you up for long, Tom?"

"No, I must go back in a few days. We have a big, new dirigible in process of construction, and it's taking a good bit of my time. But I hope to have it finished in another month and then Mary and I will enjoy our vacation together. How long are you going to stay?"

"As long as my wife will let me and while she is contented to stay with her relatives," chuckled the odd man, for it was no secret that Mrs. Damon was rather censorious and she and her odd husband led a more or less troubled life.

A little later Mr. Damon went up to speak to Mr. Swift and the Nestors, leaving Tom and

Mary to wander about the hotel grounds. Tom saw the tennis courts and the well-laid-out ball field. The hotel and its grounds occupied the level plateau of the highest of the mountain peaks in that neighborhood. All about it on every side, only pierced by a few roads, was a dense forest.

"It is dry," Tom observed, when he and his wife had gone a little way into the outlying woods. "If this ever got on fire it would be a hard job to put it out."

"Let us hope then," said Mary, with a smile, "that it will never get on fire."

"Oh, sure!" exclaimed Tom.

On the way back to the hotel veranda, where Mary said she wanted to rest awhile before dressing for dinner, they met the strange gardener who had tried to stop Mr. Damon from picking a rose.

"You want to be careful!" said the man to Tom.

"What do you mean?" asked the young inventor with not a little indignation in his voice.

"Keep away from that man who picks my roses," went on the gardener. "He is in danger. And don't you pick any flowers, either."

"Look here!" began Tom, but Mary pulled him by the arm and whispered:

"Don't have a fuss with him, Tom dear. He is a bit queer. A sort of crank about his flowers."

"I must speak to the manager about him,"

Tom decided, as he and his wife walked on, leaving the evil-faced gardener pottering about some laurel bushes.

Tom left Mary with her father and mother, Mr. Swift having gone to his room to rest. Then, while walking about the beautiful grounds, the young inventor came upon Mr. Damon talking with Mr. Thorndyke, the hotel manager.

"Well, Mr. Swift, are you enjoying yourself?" Mr. Thorndyke wanted to know.

"Very much," was the reply. "But I have been a little annoyed by the actions of one of the gardeners on the grounds."

"I was just telling him about that man myself," said Mr. Damon. "Really, Mr. Thorndyke, your guests should not be annoyed by such a fellow when they want to pick a rose or two."

"Indeed they shouldn't!" agreed the manager angrily. "I must speak to Cosso Tobini."

"Is that his name?" asked Tom. "Sounds Italian."

"It is Italian, I believe."

"Well, he got in Dutch with Mr. Damon!" chuckled Tom. "It was one fine little knock-out."

"Perhaps I shouldn't have hit him," said the odd man. "But, bless my boxing gloves, I didn't want him to hit me."

"You did perfectly right, Mr. Damon," the manager said. "Wait. Here comes Tobini now.

I shall speak to him. He is a very good workman and an excellent gardener. He has achieved results here with flowers and plants that no other man has ever been able to equal. But we are in the hotel business to please our guests, not to raise roses for a cranky gardener to keep on the bushes. Tobini is very hot-headed, but I must make him listen to reason and mend his ways."

The man with whom Mr. Damon had had such a lively little argument was coming along a path with a barrow of dirt, evidently destined for some flower bed. Mr. Thorndyke stopped him as Tom and Mr. Damon stood near.

"Look here, Tobini," said the manager, "you must stop this nonsense of trying to prevent our guests from picking roses or I will discharge you."

"They are my roses!" snapped the man, and one could see that he had a passionate love of flowers. "No one must pick them! Why should they not live out their lives on their own stems? To pick them is to kill them. Let them live their alloted lives."

"That's all nonsense," said Mr. Thorndyke. "Our guests may pick a few flowers when they choose. If you interfere with any of them again, Cosso—with Mr. Swift or Mr. Damon—you will get your walking papers. Understand?"

"They can pick my roses?" the man growled out the question.

"Certainly! Keep your tongue and hands to yourself! Now go!"

The gardener wheeled the barrow of dirt a little distance and then deliberately upset it in the middle of a gravel path. A moment later, as Tom and Mr. Damon looked in surprise at this manifestation of anger, the man took a shovel and slowly began refilling his barrow from the pile he had made.

"Bless my thermometer!" cried Mr. Damon, "what's the idea?"

"It's just one of his fits of temper," said the manager, with a shrug of his shoulders. "He has done stranger things than that. But he is such a good gardener that I hate to let him go, though I have threatened to many times."

"Well," chuckled Tom, "as long as he makes work for himself and cleans up after it, he'll be kept busy."

"It's an outlet for his rage, I suppose," the manager said. "I don't really believe he is dangerous, though he has all the hotness of the Italian race and is unreasonable in the extreme."

The incident was soon forgotten, as Tom and Mr. Damon strolled about, talking over old times and the many adventures they had shared together. If they had known it, a great adventure was just around the corner for them.

Mr. Damon was given a seat at the table where

Tom Swift and his party ate, and they were making a pleasant meal, laughing and conversing, when a sound on a veranda just outside the window near which the Swift table was placed, attracted their attention.

Mr. Thorndyke, the manager, was walking along the veranda. Suddenly, out of some side passage, sprang the gardener, Cosso Tobini. As Tom Swift looked he saw something flashing in the man's upraised hand. A moment later the young inventor knew what it was—a knife glinting in the rays of the sun.

"Look out, Mr. Thorndyke!" Tom cried.

As he spoke, the evil-faced man leaped forward, raising the knife high to strike. Mr. Thorndyke, warned by Tom Swift's cry, looked over his shoulder just in time, and, seeing the danger, began to run. There were excited shouts from those at Tom's table and from other guests.

"I will kill you!" screamed Tobini, as he raced after the fleeing manager. "You let people kill my roses! I will kill you!"

CHAPTER X

UGLY THREATS

For a moment no one seemed to know what to do, and after the first excited cries the only sounds audible were the pattering of the feet of the pursued and the pursuer on the flagged pavement of the hotel veranda.

"Bless my courthouse," gasped Mr. Damon, "there'll be murder done by that mad scoundrel!"

"Unless somebody stops him!" ejaculated Mr. Nestor.

Tom pushed back his chair and scrambled through the low window near his table and out on the broad porch. A moment later he was chasing after Tobini, who was rapidly drawing nearer to Mr. Thorndyke. The manager was a portly person, and evidently not accustomed to running. But fear lent him some speed.

"Drop that knife, you scoundrel!" cried Tom, hastening after what was, if not a madman, a man mad with rage.

"I kill him! I kill him!" screamed Tobini. "No one shall kill my roses and live!"

He was almost upon the panting manager now, but when Mr. Thorndyke looked back again and saw that murderous, gleaming knife, he took a desperate chance and leaped over the low balustrade of the veranda into some shrubbery at a place where it was not far to the ground.

"Good!" cried Tom Swift.

With a cry of rage Tobini reached the same place and started to leap down, but the young inventor was close behind him and, reaching forth a hand, tore the upraised knife from the gardener. At the same time Tom stuck out his foot and tripped Tobini so that he fell heavily. Tom was upon him in an instant, seeking to hold his hands to prevent the drawing of any other weapon. Tom had cast the knife back of him.

There was a fierce struggle for a few moments, Tobini seeking to tear himself loose; but Tom Swift was strong and would not let go. He got the fellow on his face and sat upon his back, twisting his arms up and around behind him.

By this time Mr. Damon, Mr. Nestor, and several other guests had hurried to Tom's aid, and the raging, fuming gardener was subdued, but not without a further struggle. Like all such persons, he seemed to possess the strength of several men.

"Did he kill poor Thorndyke?" asked Mrs. Nestor, after the hands and feet of Tobini had

been tied with large table napkins in lieu of ropes.

"I think not," Tom said. "I believe he jumped over the railing in time."

This proved to be true, for a few moments later the manager, rather pale and disheveled from his leap into the shrubbery, came back up on the veranda and surveyed the now subdued and temporarily quiet Italian.

"I've put up with enough of your tricks!" said the incensed manager. "You are a good workman, Tobini; but we have had too many complaints from our guests about you. This is the end!"

"What are you going to do with me?" growled the fellow.

"Send you to jail where you belong. Telephone for the state troopers," he said to one of the waiters, that constabulary being the nearest authority to the isolated hotel.

"To jail!" growled Tobini.

"Yes. That is my last word to you!"

"But it is not my last word to you!" screamed the man, trying to break from his napkin bonds and from his captors. "You shall hear from me again! I shall have my revenge!"

His face was distorted with rage and his body writhed like that of a captive snake. But Tom Swift and the others had tied the napkins well

and they held. The man was led from the veranda to a secure closet on the basement floor until the state troopers should arrive. Then the interrupted meal went on.

"He must be insane," stated Mary.

"A bad number, whatever he is," agreed Tom.

"I wish you didn't have to go, Tom," said Mary wistfully.

"So do I. But business is business."

"I know, my dear. But I—I——"

"What is it?" asked Tom, as she hesitated.

"I have such a strange feeling, as if something were going to happen," she said, looking over her shoulder apprehensively. "I feel as if we were surrounded by great danger."

"Nonsense!" laughed Tom. "Mr. Thorndyke was the only one in any danger, and the cause has been removed, or soon will be. I think the troopers are coming now," he went on, as the sound of an auto was heard in the lower road. "I'll go and see."

"No, Tom, stay with me, please!" begged Mary. They were out on the veranda after dinner.

"What's the danger?" he asked. "That fellow is well trussed."

"He might break loose," said Mary. "And he made such a dreadful threat—about revenge and killing people. I'd rather you wouldn't go. Let the state troopers take him away."

"All right," assented Tom, with a smile and a shrug of his shoulders.

A little later the madman, for such he was, temporarily at least, was taken away by the police and, so the hotel manager said, locked securely in the jail of a small town several miles away.

The excitement caused by Tobini passed away with the evening, though it was a fruitful source of conversation the next day among the guests, one and all of whom praised Tom Swift highly for so quickly disarming the fellow.

The season was now in full swing, and the hotel was well filled with guests who enjoyed the various forms of amusement and the activities provided by the manager and his helpers.

Tom and Mary went off much by themselves, as newly married couples have done since the beginning of the world and probably always will do. Mary showed Tom the various points of interest about the big estate. They went on excursions in the surrounding forests and once or twice met fire wardens who spoke of the danger of fires on account of the continued dryness.

"But we're on the watch," one deputy warden said, talking to Tom and Mary at the foot of his observation tower, from which he had descended for a little walk.

"I'll feel more at ease when I've gone back to

know that the firemen are on the alert," Tom said to his wife as they returned to the hotel.

"If anything happens, will you come and get me, Tom?" Mary asked.

"Of course!" he exclaimed and, there being none to see, he put his arms around her and kissed her.

Tom had intended to stay four days at Mt. Camon with Mary, but the second night a long distance telephone call came for him.

"It's from Mr. Jackson," he said, when he had finished the talk. "He wants me back as soon as possible. I'll go in the morning."

"Anything wrong?" asked Mr. Swift.

"Oh, Jardine is making a fuss about a lot of things regarding his dirigible," Tom said, in annoyed tones. "I've got to go and help Jackson and Ned straighten matters out."

"I hope that dwarf won't make any trouble," said Mary.

CHAPTER XI

SHADOWS OF THE NIGHT

TOM SWIFT believed among other things that when persons are on a vacation to enjoy themselves they should be bothered, annoyed and worried as little as possible. So, though he was not altogether easy in his mind regarding the message from his shop and though he was a bit apprehensive concerning that sinister dwarf, he affected to be quite at his ease.

"Don't worry, Mary," he said. "Everything will be all right."

"But why does Mr. Jackson want you to come back before your time is up?"

"Oh, a lot of little details that they think I must settle," Tom said. "I dare say they really amount to nothing. There are many things to decide in building such a big dirigible, and naturally Jackson and Ned don't want to take the responsibility."

So, though he had intended to spend another day at Mt. Camon, Tom Swift made arrange-

ments for leaving early in the morning. When the time came, the House on Wheels was brought around from the hotel garage.

"Be careful of that place where the landslide was, won't you, Tom?" Mary called to him when he was ready to leave.

"I'm not going back that way," he answered.

"When will you come up again?" she asked.

"I'll come for my long vacation as soon as the dirigible is finished," Tom said. "But I may run up for a few days before then if things are all right."

Tom was a little downcast at leaving his wife, and Mary frankly cried a little at the parting, brief though it would be. But when Tom Swift was at length on the way back, speeding along in the House on Wheels, he was thinking of so many things that even his new wife was, for the moment, crowded out of his mind.

"I hope that bird Jardine isn't going to butt in and spoil my plans," Tom said. "The dirigible may be in part his idea, but I've got to build it and do it my own way. We may come to a bust yet, if he's too fussy."

Tom stayed over night at a small country town where his strange House on Wheels attracted much attention. He received several offers to purchase it, one from the proprietor of a moving picture theater who said it would be a

good advertisement. But when he learned the cost he whistled and said:

"I guess that's a bit too steep for me!"

Tom drove the machine to the limit next day, and arrived at his shop just before closing time.

"Well, I certainly am glad to see you back!" exclaimed Ned. "Oh, boy, what a relief!"

"Why, what's the matter?" asked Tom.

"That baby Jardine," was Ned's reply. "He's had the life almost bothered out of me. He just left, and when I said you might be here by dark he said he'd be back."

"What's the idea? What does he want?" Tom asked.

"Oh, he's got some new notions about the dirigible. Wants to make changes in her construction. It's all Greek to me. I put him off as best I could."

"You didn't let him order any changes, did you?" Tom asked.

"Certainly not! Jackson held him with a firm hand. But you're going to have trouble with that bird!"

"No, I'm not," Tom said. "If there's any trouble I'll throw over the contract. It has a revoking clause, if any changes unauthorized by me are incorporated, and I won't make them."

"Stick to your guns!" chuckled Ned. "Only

you're going to have your hands full, believe me."

"What about that dwarf?" asked Tom.

"Oh, that wasn't really anything. It was just a fuss between Chock and the giant. Koku certainly gave the little man the raspberry, and I don't blame him for not standing it."

"Then Chock didn't make any trouble?"

"Not what you would call trouble, I guess. But he sure had one sweet row with your giant. Offered to lick him with one hand tied behind his back and all that, with Rad egging Chock on. For, naturally, Rad and Koku don't get on any too well."

"I know that. So the dwarf left?"

"Vamoosed in a hurry and as mad as a wet hen. Jardine, too, raised a row when he found Chock was gone, and threatened to bring him back. But I haven't noticed him doing it. Outside of that, everything is all right."

"How's the dirigible coming on?"

"Fine. The work can be rushed if Jardine doesn't make a lot of changes."

"He won't—don't worry!"

"It sure is lucky he could supply all the oralum plates ready made, and getting a lot of the machinery made up of stock parts saved a lot of time. I shouldn't wonder, Tom, but that in a few weeks you could fly the *Silver Cloud*."

"I hope so. Well, I'll take a look at things in the shop and then be ready for Jardine if he comes back."

"He will. Don't worry. How are Mary and the bunch?"

"Fine as silk. Everything went beautifully except that we were pretty nearly killed in a landslide going up and then a crazy gardener at the hotel tried to stab the manager."

"Outside of that there ain't no news, I suppose!" chuckled Ned.

"Right, me lad! And now to business!"

Tom found that his men had made good progress during his short absence and he was hopeful of an early test of the great machine, which dwarfed everything else in the big hangar where it was being constructed.

Tom and Ned had supper together and were back in the private office, going over many matters, when there was a step in the corridor outside and a well-known voice exclaimed:

"Well, you're back! I'm glad of it! There are a number of important matters I want to take up with you, Tom Swift. Here, have a cigar, and we'll consider some changes."

"Changes in what, Mr. Jardine?" Tom asked, as he laid aside the cigar offered.

"Changes in the *Silver Cloud*."

"What is the nature of the changes?" asked Tom patiently.

"Well, here's one. Now what is that sort of little dog kennel on top of the oralum envelope?" and he pointed to the detailed blue prints on Tom's desk.

"That is the weather observatory," Tom said. "An observer there will predict storms so that we may stay out of their course."

"It isn't necessary!" said Mr. Jardine, taking his cigar out of his mouth, tossing it in the air and catching it between his lips as it descended. "A little trick I just learned," he said, with an odd smile. "I could go on the stage, maybe."

"Maybe!" murmured Ned.

"Why do you consider the weather observatory unnecessary, Mr. Jardine?" asked Tom, and his voice was still patient.

"Because," was the answer, "my dirigible is to be so strong she will fear no storms, so what's the use of knowing when they are coming or from where?"

"The *Silver Cloud* will outride any ordinary storm," Tom said. "But it is well to be advised even of them. I consider the observatory vital and necessary."

"I want it enlarged and made into a private cabin for me and my friends," said Mr. Jardine. "We don't need an observatory."

"What's that?" cried Tom Swift.

"Enlarge that useless weather observatory and make it a private cabin for me and my friends," insisted the fussy little man. "And here are some other matters. There is too much space given to the crew. Cut it down by half!"

"Forty men can't get along in any less space," Tom said.

"Forty men? I'm not going to carry half that crew!" cried Mr. Jardine. "We want more room for passengers so we can make some money out of this. You've got to cut off half the crew space."

"I'll not do it!" said Tom determinedly.

"And I want one extra big motor put on, just behind the private cabin you are to build for me," said Mr. Jardine. "In case the other motors fail, I can run the ship myself with the extra big one."

"It is out of the question," Tom said, and his voice was losing some of its patience. "I have calculated the power required to move the *Silver Cloud*, and we have ample, and to spare, in the motors already planned. Another would not only be unnecessary but a positive danger, placed where you want it."

"Well, I'm going to insist on it," Mr. Jardine said. "I won't go into any more details now, but I'll take this up with you in the morning, when

you are fresher. I understand you just came in from Mt. Camon."

"Yes," Tom said, "I did. But morning isn't going to change my mind about doing what you request. It is impossible!"

"We'll talk it over in the morning," said Mr. Jardine lightly. "Have another cigar! Oh, I forgot—you don't smoke. I'll see you later. About that dwarf. I want him taken back on and your giant must let him alone. But we'll take that up to-morrow."

He hurried away, lightly humming a song as if there was nothing on his mind and as if the alterations he proposed were as easily made as changing the color to go on a new house.

"What did I tell you?" asked Ned, as he and Tom were alone again.

"He is the limit!" exclaimed Tom, in disgust. "Why, he's crazy to think those things can be done!"

"He's a nut, if you ask me!" declared Ned. "Well, you don't have to do as he says."

"You bet I don't!" exclaimed Tom fervently.

Then he and Ned considered other matters, but Tom Swift could not get out of his mind certain worrisome thoughts concerning the big dirigible and the man who had ordered it built and was paying for it. For Ned reported that the

money was still coming in from the Jardine company, according to contract.

"You'll just have to stall him along, Tom," were Ned's parting words as he left his chum in the laboratory, for Tom had some experiments to finish in connection with the *Silver Cloud*.

It was late when the young inventor came out of his shop to go home in a small car that was in waiting. As he was about to step from his private office to go to the garage he thought he saw something like the shadow of a man flit across a lighted, open space in front of the laboratory.

"That dwarf!" exclaimed Tom in a whisper as he stopped and listened.

But he heard no sound and was about to proceed when another shadow of the night flitted in front of the doorway. This shadow was taller.

"Jardine!" whispered Tom. "What are he and that dwarf doing around here at this time of night?"

CHAPTER XII

BAD NEWS

MARTIN JARDINE, for he it was, and in company with the dwarf, either had no intention of concealing his movements, or, now that he was caught, relinquished such an intention, for when Tom Swift stepped from the doorway he met the man and Jim Chock coming in.

"Oh, excuse me, Mr. Swift," Jardine began lightly, as though asking for a light for his cigar, "but I met Chock after I left you and he begged so hard that I intercede for him that I agreed to do so. I saw a light in your office and guessed you were still here, so I turned in. So now let's talk things over."

"Excuse me," Tom said. "I have nothing against you personally, Chock," he said. "But you and Koku would be sure to quarrel, and that would mean disruption in the shop. I can't have that."

"I wouldn't quarrel with your giant, Mr. Swift. Though he sure did get me r'iled," said the dwarf.

"I understand. Perhaps it wasn't altogether your fault. But Koku has been with me many years. I know his ways and his failings, and I am not going to part with him."

"But, Mr. Swift," broke in Jardine. "Think how useful a man as small as Chock will be on the dirigible."

"I have considered, and I can't have him. After you take the ship over you can do as you please. Until I complete it and turn it over to you, I have the final say as regards the working force. The contracts call for that."

"Yes, I know, Mr. Swift——"

"Now, there is no use prolonging the discussion," Tom interrupted. "I am tired and need rest. This is a closed matter!"

"All right," Jardine seemed to assent graciously enough. "I guess you'll have to stay away, Jim," he said to the little man. "But I'll put you aboard when the *Silver Cloud* is my own."

"You may do as you please then," Tom said. "And I will now bid you good-night."

"Well, I'll see you in the morning about those changes," Jardine said, and Tom did not think it worth while to say it would be useless.

The young inventor remained in his office doorway until he had seen Jardine and the dwarf leave the premises, and then, going to the main gate, Tom said to the watchman:

"Don't let that dwarf in here again, even if he comes with Mr. Jardine."

"I didn't let him in this time," said the man.

"You didn't! Then how did he get in?"

"Blessed if I know, Mr. Swift. I had orders to let in Mr. Jardine, and I did, twice to-night. But the dwarf wasn't with him either time."

"Then Chock must have been hidden in here all the while," said Tom. "That looks bad! I don't like this a bit. He must have been in here and met Jardine the second time that man came back."

"Maybe the dwarf climbed under the fence, same as he tried to do before," suggested the watchman. "The charged wire isn't yet in place."

"I must see to that at once—first thing in the morning," Tom said. "I can't have things like this going on."

He gave orders that the plant was to be closely watched that night and put extra men on duty in the hangar where the dirigible was. But he could think of no reason why Jardine would want to damage his own property or smuggle the dwarf in.

"It's a queer game," mused Tom, as he went to bed. "As Ned said, he must be a nut. I'll be glad when I've finished with him."

However, troubles often vanish with darkness, and the next day, somewhat to Tom Swift's sur-

prise, Jardine neither made any reference to his midnight visit with the dwarf nor did he speak of the unusual changes he wanted made in the *Silver Cloud*. When he and Tom made the usual inspection of work on the big machine Jardine said:

"Everything is coming along well, Mr. Swift. I am more than pleased! Now don't work too hard over this yourself. Take a few days off. While I'd like to get the dirigible as soon as possible, I don't want you to kill yourself. Everything is fine! Go along as you are."

"Well, I'll be darned!" said Tom to Ned, when they were alone. "He must talk in his sleep or something, to go on this way after what he said last night."

"Just a nut!" murmured Ned, with a chuckle, as he made a circular motion with one finger near his head. "Wheels—going around," he added. "But you needn't worry as long as he pays you."

"I suppose not," assented Tom, laughing a little.

For the next week nothing happened, except a lot of hard work. Tom Swift pushed the labor on the dirigible and, to his delight, Mr. Jardine did not come near the works. Nor did he send any word about nonsensical changes or the hiring of the dwarf. That odd creature was not seen again, and Tom gave orders that he was not to be admitted. The charged wire at the bottom of the

fence was again adjusted and the place was well guarded.

"Well, Ned," said Tom one afternoon, when unusually good progress had been made on the dirigible, "I think I'll take a few days off and run up to see Mary."

"Good idea!" agreed the financial manager. "Give her my love and remember me to your dad and the Nestors."

"I will. Don't you want to come along?"

"I'd like to, but I don't believe it would be best for us both to be away at the same time, Tom. I'll take an outing when you come back."

"Be sure you do."

Tom Swift made the second trip to Mt. Camon in a smaller but more speedy car, and it need not be said that Mary was delighted to see him. The unexpectedness of his visit made it the more delightful.

"Oh, I'm so glad you came!" she murmured. "I feel safer now."

"Why, nothing has happened, has there?" Tom asked.

"Oh, no. But I can't get over thinking there may."

"That crazy gardener hasn't been around again, has he?"

"No, the poor fellow is in jail yet, I guess."

"Then don't worry," Tom advised.

"Well, bless my porous plaster!" cried Mr. Damon when he saw Tom a little later. "You're a sight for sore eyes! Up for good?"

"No, only for a few days this time. But I expect my next visit will be a longer one. I hope to finish the season here."

The hotel was well filled, many new guests having arrived, and when Tom went down to the dining room he saw a stylishly dressed woman at the table next to the one where he had a place with his father, Mary, and her parents. The lady wore many diamonds, yet without an air of display. With her were two children in their teens, the boy Harry and the girl Laura.

As Tom left his seat after dinner, Mary having preceded him, he paused a moment to let the bediamonded lady pass out first, but she stopped and spoke to him.

"Excuse me," she said in pleasant tones, "but aren't you Tom Swift, the eminent inventor?"

"I don't want to say how eminent I am," said Tom modestly. "But that is my name."

"I am glad to meet you," she went on. "I was told you were here; but your people, whom I have come to know slightly, said you were not expected for some time."

"I ran up unannounced between jobs, so to speak," said Tom. "I am at work on a big dirigible."

"That is what I want to speak to you about," went on the lady in a low voice. "Could I have a few minutes' talk with you alone?"

"What's this?" thought Tom. "Is this a prospective customer for another airship to rival the *Silver Cloud,* or does she want to engage passage on the first trip?"

"Run along, my dears," said the lady to her children. "Will you come out on the veranda with me, Mr. Swift?" she went on. "I am sure your wife will excuse you a moment, won't you, Mrs. Swift?" This to Mary.

"Of course, Mrs. Jardine! I didn't know you knew my husband."

"I took the liberty of introducing myself," the lady smilingly replied, while many thoughts surged through Tom's head as he heard Mary call his companion "Mrs. Jardine."

"Are you the wife of the man for whom I am building the big dirigible?" Tom Swift asked when he and Mrs. Jardine were in a secluded place on the big hotel veranda. "Excuse me for not recognizing you."

"How could you, never having seen me before? I am Mrs. Jardine, but not the one you suppose," and her voice had in it a quality Tom could not fathom.

"I am Mrs. Lawrence Jardine," she went on.

"Lawrence Jardine?" Tom murmured, more and more puzzled.

"The sister-in-law of Martin Jardine for whom, I believe, you are making a big airship."

"Yes, certainly," Tom said. "Martin Jardine is the name."

"He is my husband's brother," went on the lady, and her air grew more serious. "I have been anxious to get word to you, but I did not just know how to go about it," she added. "But when my husband sent me and the children to this hotel and I found that your family were guests here and that you were coming, I decided to wait and see you. I have important news for you—bad news I am afraid."

"Bad news!" murmured Tom. The puzzle was more complicated.

"Yes. While it is true that Martin Jardine is in partnership with his brother, my husband, I do not believe that Martin had any authority to go ahead and order that big airship built. In fact, I am quite sure he had not. He did it on his own responsibility, and I feel sure my husband and the other members of the firm will disapprove of it. I should advise you to stop work at once."

"This is bad news, indeed!" exclaimed Tom. "But can't I get in touch with your husband and settle this matter?" All the suspicions regarding Martin Jardine rushed to the fore again.

"My husband is in Mexico prospecting for new mines and oil wells," said Mrs. Jardine. "I have not heard from him for some time, but I have sent him word about his brother's mad project. I think you had better have nothing more to do with the *Silver Cloud*."

"This is most surprising!" Tom exclaimed.

"I feared it would be. I am sorry."

"So am I," Tom said. "This will make a big difference to me."

"Yes, I suppose so. Martin was always odd. You must have noticed it, Mr. Swift."

"I have. But he seemed to have good business sense, and he has met his payments promptly."

"I think he will not meet any more after my husband hears of his latest freakish project. You are well out of it if you have lost nothing."

"Oh, we can't get out of it so easily," Tom said. "We have invested large sums ourselves, and hoped to be paid back. This certainly is bad news," and with a troubled face Tom paced the veranda.

CHAPTER XIII

A CHANGE OF PLANS

MARY came to the door of the hotel and looked out where Tom Swift was pacing up and down, while Mrs. Jardine watched him anxiously.

"Oh, Tom!" Mary called.

"Yes," he answered, starting out of his troubled reverie. "What is it?"

"Will you make up a hand at bridge? We are one short, and mother is so fond of her game. Mr. Damon, too."

"Oh, all right," Tom answered, with a glance at Mrs. Jardine. "Will you excuse me?" he said to her.

"Certainly," she murmured.

No one, probably, ever felt less like playing bridge than did Tom Swift that evening after having heard the disquieting news. He could not get it out of his mind, and yet he must. So he forced himself to exchange light hotel gossip with his wife and the others and, in addition, had to remember what was trumps, whether the

lead was in the hand of the dummy or elsewhere, and keep track of the cards played. It was hard work, but he and Mary managed to take the odd trick more than once and won the rubber against Mr. Damon and Mrs. Nestor.

But all the while he was wondering how he could get another talk with Mrs. Jardine and find out more particulars without letting Mary and his father know the disastrous news. For it was disastrous in several ways. It was a blow to the prestige of the Swift plant and a big money loss if they were to have the big dirigible left on their hands.

"I ought to get word back to Ned and Mr. Jackson to stop everything if what Mrs. Jardine tells me is true," mused Tom, as he walked out on the veranda after the game to get a breath of outer air before going to bed. Then he saw Mrs. Jardine again and as Mary had remained inside, Tom had a clear coast for extracting information.

But a further talk only confirmed what Mrs. Jardine had first told him—that her brother-in-law, Martin Jardine, was an irresponsible schemer and had, several times before, involved the firm in enterprises which had to be abandoned.

"He has wonderful ideas sometimes," Mrs. Jardine said of Martin. "But he is a dreamer and

is also very eccentric. I have no authority for telling you to stop work; but that would be my advice. I have tried to get in touch with my husband in Mexico. I have sent messages to several places where he may call, and I have told him to communicate with you at your shop at once."

"Thank you. I shall take your advice and cease work on the dirigible, pending some word from your husband. And I think I had better get back to headquarters to receive any messages that may come from him. He would not know I am here, and if he called up my shop, no one there would feel authorized to do what he told them; but I'll take precautionary measures."

This Tom Swift did at once by sending a night letter to Mr. Jackson, telling him to stop work on the dirigible until the young inventor could get back.

"This is the second time my temporary vacation has been cut short," Tom mused, as he went up to his room, planning to leave early the next morning. "Confound that crazy Martin Jardine, anyhow!"

Mary was disappointed, of course, when Tom told her he had to go away again; but when he explained that it had to do with the dirigible she made no objections, for she knew what the completion of the *Silver Cloud* would mean to Tom Swift's reputation. Nor did he tell her how

near the project was to being wrecked. Neither did he say anything to his father, for Mr. Swift needed quiet and repose. Time enough for that when he himself knew more of the situation.

Tom appeared at the works two days later, to find Ned, Mr. Jackson, and the foremen of the various shops in a quandary over his message to cease operations.

"What's the idea?" Ned asked, for Tom's telegram had not gone into details. He did not want word of the fiasco to get out. "Stopping work on the biggest thing we've ever turned out, Tom!"

"It had to be done," Tom said, regretfully enough. "It may be only temporary, but I fear for the worst. I'm expecting a message any time now."

"It will be a shame to have to scrap all this," said Garret Jackson, looking up at the huge mass towering over their heads in the hangar. "Why, a couple of weeks more, and she'll be ready for the air!"

"It is too bad," Tom said. "It will mean a big money loss to us."

"Yes," assented Ned. "It has cost a lot more than we originally calculated on, and though Jardine has met his payments according to contract, they have not been enough. We should have stipulated for more money."

"I don't believe we'll get any more," said Tom

grimly, and he related all Mrs. Lawrence Jardine had told him about her erratic brother-in-law.

Tom and his intimate associates were in consultation over the matter when the telephone in the private office rang and when the girl announced "long distance," Tom had a feeling, he said later, that it had something to do with the Jardine matter.

This proved true, for Tom soon heard the voice of Lawrence Jardine talking to him from Mexico City and saying:

"Stop all work on that dirigible ordered by my brother. He had no authority to go ahead."

"Isn't your firm responsible?" Tom inquired.

"Not in this case. Martin acted beyond his rights. We shall not make any further payments."

"I think you are bound to," Tom said quietly.

"Nothing doing, Mr. Swift. I am on my way home and I'll stop to see you. But don't finish that airship!"

"I won't—that is, not for your firm," Tom replied. "But it seems a pity to scrap it. All right, Mr. Jardine. I'll wait until I see you up here."

It was tedious waiting in Shopton until the older brother and real head of the Jardine firm should arrive from Mexico; but there was nothing else to do. So all work on the dirigible was

halted. Meanwhile Tom Swift tried to get in touch with the eccentric Martin, but without effect.

At length, one day while Tom was in his office, Koku came in, very quietly for so big a man, and announced:

"Mans to see you, Master."

"Show him in," Tom directed, as Koku handed him the card of Lawrence Jardine.

The young inventor was soon face to face with the older brother and real head of the Jardine company. Lawrence Jardine was a hard-headed business man, quite different from the eternal cigar-smoking Martin. Though he had good business sense, he could not be moved from his position that as the dirigible was ordered by Martin, the latter was without authority and the firm would repudiate the matter. Tom and Ned talked it over and realized that Lawrence Jardine was within his legal rights.

"But there is a moral side to it," Tom said. "I took this order from your brother in good faith, and he seemed cloaked with full authority to enter into negotiations."

"Martin is a fool!" burst out his brother. "It isn't the first time he has dangerously involved our concern and spent money foolishly. No, I'm through, and I won't have the dirigible at any price!"

"Won't you take a look at it first?" suggested Ned. "It will be a big advertisement for your oralum metal plates."

"It's entirely too big an advertisement!" snapped Lawrence. "I tell you, I don't want it!"

Tom tried to influence him, telling him of the various advantages of the new dirigible, how far it could cruise, and what a load it could carry above the clouds, but the head of the Jardine company was obdurate.

"I'm through!" he said, and his voice cracked like a whip.

"Well," remarked Ned, "there are certain uncompleted payments your brother promised to make, amounting to several thousand dollars. We are entitled to them."

"Try to get the money!" retorted Lawrence.

"That's plain crooked!" exploded Tom.

"Don't you call me crooked!" fired back the other.

"Well, your brother is."

"Not so much crooked as a fool. You can sue if you like, but I'll not accept the dirigible and you'll get no more money!"

There followed a hot and heavy discussion, bordering on a quarrel, but Lawrence Jardine could not be moved and in the end he stamped out of the office, leaving Tom and Ned defeated.

"Well, what's next to be done, Tom?" Ned

asked, looking at the plans, specifications, and contracts having to do with the *Silver Cloud.* His desk was littered with them.

"Hanged if I know," Tom said moodily.

"Do you think you could sell the dirigible as she is, perhaps to the United States or Germany?" asked Ned. "It would beat even the *Graf Zeppelin.*"

"I might make a sale," assented Tom listlessly. "But it would take negotiations of nearly a year to bring it about. Meanwhile everything would be tied up."

"You think the airship will be a success, don't you Tom?"

"Sure, she'll be a success!" cried the young inventor. "I'm positive of that. Even if the oralum did come from those crazy Jardines, it's a wonderful metal. It wouldn't take much to put the *Silver Cloud* in running order."

"It would be a big feather in the cap of the Swift company if you could get it going, Tom," said Ned.

Then, suddenly, a great change came over Tom Swift. He fairly jumped from his chair, his eyes shining, and exclaimed:

"I'll do it! Bless my propellers, as Mr. Damon would say, but I'll do it!"

"Do what?" asked Ned.

"I'll finish the dirigible for myself! It will be

mine from top to bottom and end to end! I'll keep the name, but nothing else. I'll own the *Silver Cloud!*"

"Good for you!" shouted Ned as enthusiastically as his chum. "But can you manage it?" he added more soberly.

"Yes. We'll make new plans. Oh, I don't mean to change the plan of the airship," he went on, as Ned looked at the mass of papers. "She is too nearly completed for that. But we'll think up some plan to raise the rest of the money needed, and I'll finish and own this ship myself!"

"Then you and I'll go sailing in it!" cried Ned.

"Surest thing you know!" exclaimed Tom. "Send Mr. Jackson here and I'll issue orders to rush the work to completion!"

CHAPTER XIV

BUCKING A HURRICANE

WHAT at first seemed almost an impossible undertaking gradually became less and less so as the days passed. So about a week after Tom Swift had changed his plans and made what seemed a momentous decision, work was resumed on the *Silver Cloud* at almost doubled speed.

How the necessary money was raised, partly by straining credit to the uttermost and partly by selling some valuable patents, and how permission was finally squeezed out of Lawrence Jardine to sell at cost price the necessary oralum plates needed to finish the craft—all this, as Tom and Ned said afterward, seemed like part of a nightmare. They had never worked harder in their lives.

But they were successful, and though Lawrence Jardine refused to lend his name, money, or influence to the further completion of the big dirigible, it was continued without his help—save his somewhat grudging acquiescence to sell the oralum plates.

All this time not another word was heard from Martin Jardine nor the grotesque dwarf who seemed like some uncanny familiar spirit of his. They appeared to have dropped out of sight and hearing, and Tom did not try to locate them.

"We're well through with such folks," he said to his chum.

"That's right," agreed Ned. "I'm glad your father and Mary are away from here enjoying themselves. They'd be upset if they knew all we have gone through."

"I guess that's right," Tom assented wearily.

"How are they up at Mt. Camon?" asked Ned.

"All right. It's pretty dry there. No rain at all."

"The whole country is suffering from that," observed Ned. "There have been a number of small forest fires and there may be more."

"I hope not!" exclaimed Tom. "If the woods around that hotel where Mary and the folks are ever got to burning, nothing could put the blaze out. I don't like to think of it!"

"Then don't," advised Ned. "The fire wardens are on the watch and they have plenty of help. Now about the notes we have to sign to get that bank loan."

"Oh, yes," Tom replied. "Gosh! I hope I can finish that dirigible and sell her, or get some money out of her. If I can't, I'll be bankrupt. But

this is about the last money we'll need. I'll have the craft finished this day week."

"Let's hope so," responded Ned. "We haven't much credit left and the cash is going fast. Maybe when you've made a successful trip, Uncle Sam or one of the commercial companies will buy the *Silver Cloud*."

"Maybe, is a slight foundation of hope on which to spend so much money. Anyhow, we'll soon give her a trial."

It was decided not to finish the craft completely, that is, the cabin accommodations for passengers would be omitted temporarily.

"What we'll do," said Tom, talking the matter over with Ned, "will be to make it mechanically perfect. You and I and the crew can rough it on the trial trip; I mean as to sleeping and eating. Later, if she behaves as I hope she will, we may interest some capitalists and finish the passengers' cabins in *de luxe* style for transoceanic travel."

"Like the Zeppelins," suggested Ned.

"That's it. But now we'll save all the money we can."

In general, however, the original plans were carried out. The big all metal envelope to hold the lifting gas was finished. The various motor compartments were constructed within it and the powerful propellers, thrust out here and there

to get a grip on the air, alone showed the motive power. By putting the motor gondolas inside the envelope much air resistance was done away with. This was one of Tom's original ideas.

The quarters for the crew were simply finished and those for the navigating officers contained no luxuries. The young inventor said he was willing to sleep on the floor of his cabin and eat off his lap to save money for essentials.

Tom received a letter each day from his wife, telling of events at the Mt. Camon hotel. More than once she asked when he was coming up for his vacation. She said that Mrs. Lawrence Jardine and her children were still at the place, and from the fact that Mary was friendly with her Tom guessed that the wife of the head of the Jardine concern had been discreet in not telling of the fiasco.

Tom wrote back that he would be up soon, but he did not tell Mary of a daring plan he had in mind. This was to sail the *Silver Cloud* over the wooded mountain on top of which the hotel was perched.

"That is if I can get her to go," Tom said to his chum.

"I never saw anything yet, from a motor cycle to a submarine, you couldn't get going if you tried hard enough," returned Ned.

"Well, you can bet I'm going to try!" declared Tom Swift emphatically.

From then on there were days and nights of hard work on the big dirigible. In a way, Tom Swift was glad of the Jardine episode since it left him his own master and he could build the airship as he pleased without the eccentric suggestions of Martin Jardine and the menace of having the grotesque dwarf around.

"Huh!" exclaimed Koku when told that Chock would not return. "If him do I bust him open same as Radicate bust watermelons!"

"That's going some!" chuckled Tom.

So the work went on, hammer and tongs, tongs and hammer, until at last the oralum envelope was completed and proved gas tight. The motors had been tested and worked very well, but they would do better after a trial spin, Tom said. The quarters for the crew, for Tom, Ned and the executives of his plant, were roughly finished so they could be used, and at last all was in readiness for a trial flight.

Great tanks of the new lifting gas had been charged in readiness, and there was an apparatus aboard the *Silver Cloud* for making more gas in case of emergency.

"But one filling ought to last for ten thousand miles," Tom declared to Ned.

"How about food?" asked the young financial

man the night before the day set for the test when they were examining the ship and talking matters over.

"We shan't be in the air long enough for that," Tom replied.

"Can't tell. Might get stuck up there," suggested Ned. "I'm going to ask Mrs. Baggert to make some sandwiches."

"All right. Now I've got to see that those gas pressure gages register properly. Then we'll be all set."

The day for the test flight broke calm and clear. Tom was glad of this. There was activity in the plant long before sunrise, and by the time Old Sol's rosy beams were warming the earth all was in readiness.

Tom Swift was in the navigating cabin, which was in the nose of the ship. Above him was a weather expert, Mr. Kirby Larson, who had been in the United States Government service. Mr. Larson had to himself the little cabin which Martin Jardine had wanted to make into a personal stateroom.

"All ready!" cried Tom to the ground crew of men who were to walk the big dirigible out of the hangar.

"All ready!" came from the captain of this crew.

"Go!" ordered Tom.

Slowly the *Silver Cloud* left her birthplace, and for the first time emerged into the open. The full lifting power of the gas was not exerted until she was clear of the hangar, and then Tom, having received word that all was clear, cried:

"Let go!"

The ground crew loosed the mooring ropes, the power of the lifting gas began to make itself felt, and the great dirigible slowly rose like some immense but graceful creature of the air.

"Half speed ahead!" Tom signalled to the various motor compartments, and the great machines began to whirl the propellers in unison. The *Silver Cloud*, looking very like her namesake, went upward and ahead.

A cheer rose from the crowd below, workmen of the Swift plant. But as the ship passed over the high fence and came into view generally, another crowd of townspeople and other curious folk who had heard about the latest Swift achievement set up loud shouts of surprise and approbation.

"She's the biggest airship in the world!" cried one man.

This was true. For the *Silver Cloud* was nearly a thousand feet long.

"Well, Ned, she's going up!" Tom said to his chum, as, together, they stood in the control cabin.

"Of course she is!" exclaimed Ned. "I wish your father were here to see it."

"I wish those Jardines were here, or at least the head of the company!" snapped Tom.

"Why?"

"Because if he sees she's a success he might buy her and we'd get our money back."

"Of course there's no great market yet for a giant airship, but if this one is a success we'll hope you won't have any trouble in selling her at a profit," remarked Ned slowly. "But is this as fast as she can go?"

"I should say not!" chuckled Tom. "But I've got to start the new motors easily at first."

In a little while the craft was gathering speed and when she had arisen several thousand feet into the air she was humming along at nearly a hundred miles an hour. She was capable of more than this.

As Tom Swift and Ned Newton were rejoicing over what seemed like a wonderful success a signal from Mr. Larson in the upper weather observatory came to them.

"You had better turn about," he said.

"Why?" asked Tom.

"We are heading for a low pressure area and I think there is a storm center there. The instruments indicate a powerful wind blowing—one of hurricane strength. Turn back."

To the surprise of Ned Newton, the young inventor, instead of giving the signal to turn the airship, kept her headed in a straight course.

"What's the idea?" asked Ned. "You're running into trouble—into a hurricane!"

"That's just what I want to do," replied Tom. "If this craft is any good at all, she can't be sailed in fair weather only. She'll have to stand storm and stress; and if she won't, now is the time to discover it. I'm going to buck the hurricane!"

"Whew!" whistled the young financial man. "Then I'm glad I brought along some sandwiches."

"Why?"

"We may get shipwrecked and need them."

"We shan't get shipwrecked," said Tom Swift confidently. "But I'd like to see how she acts in a big wind."

A little later the *Silver Cloud* began to pitch and toss.

"I think you're going to get your wish," cried Ned, clinging to a safety hand rail in the cabin.

There was a call from the weather observer in his high cabin.

"Hurricane just ahead!" he reported. "Turn back!"

"Full speed ahead!" Tom ordered to the motor rooms.

Then the *Silver Cloud* was battling with a powerful, furious wind.

"Feel that drop!" cried Ned, as the craft was whirled toward the earth. "Will she stand it, Tom?"

"She's got to stand it!" was the fierce reply of the young inventor.

For a few moments, in spite of the brave words of Tom Swift, it was almost touch and go in the fight between the big dirigible and the powerful wind.

CHAPTER XV

CAUGHT IN THE FOG

TOM SWIFT, the young inventor, did not give up making the *Silver Cloud* fight her way into the very teeth of the hurricane, and, though the ship seemed to turn and twist as though to escape the ordeal, he held her to her task. The motors hummed, the big propellers whirled their way, tossing aside the roaring winds, and the *Silver Cloud* moved ahead.

"Only an all metal ship would stand this!" murmured Tom, as, with Ned beside him, he stood in the control cabin and watched the various gages which indicated the height and speed of the craft.

"Yes, a fabric envelope like those of the Zeppelins, even on a metal frame, would be torn off," Ned agreed.

He knew something about reading the gages and he noted, with Tom, that now the great craft would be forced down slightly, and again, when getting into some "pocket" where the hurricane

was not of such powerful strength, she would ascend.

Her forward speed was cut at times from around a hundred miles an hour, which it had been in the calm atmosphere, to less than thirty. But Tom Swift had not yet used all the power in his motors.

"Here goes for a big test, though!" he presently decided. "The engines have been run on the blocks long enough to wear the pistons smooth, so I think I can chance giving her about all she'll take. Let's see if we can't run through this hurricane."

Tom signaled for more speed to the motor compartments. The *Silver Cloud* trembled, but, after a moment of uncertainty, the occupants of the control cabin saw the needle of the speed dial begin to move slowly toward the higher figures.

"Sixty!" called Ned.

"Good!" murmured Tom, who was steering the ship.

"Seventy!" cried Ned.

"She can do better than that!" Tom said.

"Up to a hundred now!" reported Ned a moment later.

"That's good, considering the wind is dead against her," Tom agreed. "But if she's to make a trip around the world, as I hope, she may meet with even worse winds than this, and to beat

them she'll have to do at least a hundred and fifty now."

"She can't!" Ned declared. "Never!"

"Well, if I can get to one twenty-five I'll be satisfied," Tom said.

The ship throbbed, trembled, and vibrated from end to end. In the motor compartments, which Ned visited in turn, to make sure all was well, the men tense, eager, and anxious, bent over their machines and gages. The one great fear was lest some bearing should overheat or an oil feed or fuel pipe break, thus cutting down the power.

Nothing like this happened, and when Ned Newton got back to the control cabin he glanced at the speed gage and cried:

"One hundred and thirty!"

"Good!" shouted his chum. "That beats the hurricane!"

A moment later there came a signal from Mr. Larson:

"We have run through the storm."

This was immediately noticed, for the speed of the ship went to one hundred and sixty miles an hour, there being no head wind now to hold her back. But as such speed was needlessly racing the motors, Tom cut it down to a normal rate of eighty miles.

"Well, you did it," Ned remarked when, hav-

ing swept through the hurricane area, they turned about and headed for Shopton on a course that would not again take them into a danger zone.

"The airship did it!" replied Tom. "Give her the credit."

"Are you satisfied?" asked Ned.

"Not altogether," Tom admitted. "I can see where I can make some improvements. But they will come later. On the whole, I think she did very well, and in a severe test, too."

"I'll say it was severe!" murmured Ned, rubbing some bruised spots where he had been tossed against the cabin walls.

That evening the *Silver Cloud* was housed in her hangar, safe and sound save for a few minor mishaps. There was great rejoicing in the Swift plant, for it was felt that the work was a big success.

"But I'll make her better yet," declared Tom.

"Then the Jardines will be sorry they called the game off," predicted Ned.

"Maybe," said Tom, with a grim smile. "We'll see."

"Gosh!" Ned suddenly exclaimed.

"What's the matter?"

"I forgot, in the hurricane, all about eating those sandwiches!" laughed Ned.

There were still more busy days of work in the Swift plant when once again the big dirigible

was in her hangar. Several changes were carried out, one motor that had shown a weakness was replaced and different propellers were put on.

A number of new instruments were adjusted and several pieces of apparatus designed for comfort and safety, which had not been installed on the trial trip, were added. Also, the passengers' main cabin and some of the staterooms were partly finished.

"We could pretty nearly make a trip around the world now," Ned observed, as he went over the ship one night with his chum.

"Yes," was the answer. "But I want another test first."

"We got a good write-up in the papers about the one we had," Ned stated, showing Tom a bundle of press clippings. "They called it another Swift triumph."

"Yes," Tom chuckled. "But they ain't seen nothin' yet, as the joke has it. Let 'em wait!"

"It's queer we haven't heard a word from the Jardines," went on Ned. "You'd think they might at least wish us well."

"I don't want to hear from that crazy Martin," Tom said. "But Lawrence seemed business-like. He might at least make us a rebate for the advertising we're giving his oralum metal."

"Sure," agreed Ned. "But he's hard-boiled!"

A week later the *Silver Cloud* was ready for

another test. She took the air more easily, for the lifting power of the gas had been increased somewhat, and she moved along more smoothly under the power of her motors.

"Going to buck another hurricane?" asked Ned, with a laugh, as he stood in the control cabin with Tom.

"Not unless we have to. But we can do it."

They moved speedily through the air, the members of the crew getting more familiar with their duties. There seemed to be no hitch in the smooth performance of the great airship.

"I'll head south," Tom decided after a while.

"You'll have to go higher than this if you do," Ned told him. "You know the Moochie range of mountains lie south and there are some pretty tall peaks."

"We can clear them," Tom declared. "But I will go higher."

The *Silver Cloud* rose above those masses of vapor for which she was named and sailed through the brilliant sunlight. Then she passed over a large lake, heading for the high mountains. In a little while a warning came from the weather observer:

"Fog ahead!"

"Confound the luck!" exclaimed Tom, for fog is one element no airship, however powerful, has ever been able to conquer.

"Go up!" advised Ned.

But when Tom called for a more detailed report, Mr. Larson said the fog was more dense above than below, so the ship descended.

They were now cruising, though at reduced speed, through what was a dense, white vapor, and even Tom Swift was rather apprehensive.

Suddenly a signal of alarm came from Mr. Larson.

"Stop! Back up!" he called through the telephone.

Tom's hand was on the lever to signal the motor rooms when there came a sudden jar, a dull thud, and the ship stood still, held fast in what seemed to be a bank of dense fog.

CHAPTER XVI

A GIANT'S STRENGTH

"WHAT happened?" cried Ned Newton.

"We seem to have struck something," Tom answered. In spite of the emergency and, probably, danger, the young inventor remained cool and collected.

"Struck something!" ejaculated Ned. "How could that be so, high in the air? Air travel isn't yet as popular as autoing. If we were on the ground I could believe it."

"We aren't very high," Tom said, glancing at the gage. "I have a strong suspicion that we have rammed the side of a mountain."

"Whew!" whistled Ned. "That's bad!"

"Luckily we were going slowly. Also somebody must have cut off the motors even before I signaled for it," observed Tom. "At worse, I think we've crushed the false nose." The *Silver Cloud* was provided with a fender, like those on autos, on the front of the cigar-shaped gas envelope of oralum. It was one of the last improvements designed by the young inventor.

"Well," remarked Ned, not feeling so alarmed now, "if we've only got a bent fender, so to speak, what's the matter with backing up out of the way of the mountain, if that's what we hit, begging its pardon, and going on?"

"We'll try," Tom answered, laughing at Ned's conceit, as he went to the door of his control cabin. He had heard the rush of feet and knew his officers and crew were hastening to report for orders.

"Maybe we hit another airship," suggested Ned.

"No, I hardly think that," Tom answered, trying to peer out of one of the cabin windows. "It's hard to see."

"It's as thick as bean soup," murmured Ned. "I can't make out anything except a lot of fog and something dimly black beyond it."

"That's the mountain we hit, I think," Tom said. "But I'll have the search lights turned on and they may help a little."

Another of his recent improvements was a battery of powerful lights, located on the outside of the oralum envelope and just below the control cabin. They had a new style of lens and the beams of light sent out were designed to penetrate fog and smoke. Of course no light will penetrate far under these conditions, but those of

Tom Swift's big dirigible were far ahead of any others yet invented.

Suddenly the white, murky mist all about the *Silver Cloud* was brightly illuminated and the observers in Tom's control cabin, peering out and ahead, saw dimly just in front of them the dark, forest-grown, sloping side of a mountain. The big ship, sailing low in the fog, had rammed her nose into it.

"Well, it isn't as bad as it might be," Ned remarked, as he took an observation, aided by the gleaming fog-lights. "Can't you back up and go on, Tom? Rise above the fog, maybe. The gas envelope isn't cracked, is it?"

"No," Tom answered, glancing at a gage. "Otherwise the lowered pressure, caused by escaping gas, would show here. The pressure is normal for this height."

"Then pull out and let's get out of this!" suggested Ned.

"Good advice if we can follow it," Tom said. "I'll try."

"He gave the signal half speed astern, but though the motors tried to back the big dirigible, making her tremble with their power, they did not budge her.

"She's held fast!" said Tom. "I was afraid of this."

"What do you think has happened?" Ned wanted to know.

"Nothing serious; that is, to the airship herself," Tom said. "But we have rammed her nose into a mountain side, and broken trees, rocks, and a tangle of bushes are holding us there."

"You bucked the tornado!" cried Ned. "Why can't you rip off the false nose, or fender, if you have to, as long as it won't damage the gas envelope? Surely you have power enough to pull out of some broken trees!"

"You might think so," Tom replied. "But did you ever see a big ocean liner made fast to her dock with big hawsers?"

"Of course," Ned replied.

"Well," went on the young inventor, "if those hawsers were taut and the liner started her engines, she could never get away from that dock in a thousand years. There must be play enough for her to get some momentum. That's what we need, momentum. If the liner had a few feet play, or free movement, and could start ahead with her engines at full speed, she'd break those hawsers like thread. But if they hold her tight to the dock, her propellers would only churn the water.

"Now our propellers are only fanning air, so to speak. We can't get enough movement to make our weight and speed count. What we'll have to do is to cut loose from the holding tangle of trees."

"How can we do that?" asked Ned.

"That remains to be seen," Tom answered. "If this fog would only clear, I could see just what the trouble is." At this moment Koku, who had been taken along on this trip at his earnest solicitation, came into the cabin, being a sort of privileged character.

"What um wrong, Master?" he asked.

"We ran into trees on the side of the mountain," Tom answered. "We can't pull loose. We're like a football caught in the branches, Koku. We need somebody to give us a push off."

"Me push!" grunted the giant, flexing his powerful hands and arms.

"By golly, do you know I think he's got it!" cried Ned.

"Got what?" asked Tom.

"The right idea," went on the manager. "There's an exit out of the front end of your gas envelope, isn't there, Tom? I mean in between the individual gas tank holders?"

"Yes, there's a passage out through the nose to the mooring ring."

"Big enough for Koku?"

"Oh, yes."

"Then," went on Ned, "why not have him go out that way and cut us loose from the tangled, broken trees and bushes that are holding us fast? Koku's giant strength may get us loose."

Tom considered this for a moment, seeing the dangers, difficulties, and possibilities. Then he said:

"It's a chance! Koku, come with me!"

"Sure, Master! Me push—me pull—bust anything!" chuckled the giant.

Passing along amidships through a central tube running the length of the dirigible, Tom, Koku, Ned, and some of the crew emerged on to a small platform in the very nose of the ship. There the cause of the stoppage was plain to be seen, for the fog was now lifting.

The *Silver Cloud* had rammed her front fender deep into the crotch of a big tree growing on the mountain side. The crotch was partly split down, and the fender was bent and broken. But the actual structure of the airship had sustained no damage. The fender was caught about fifty feet above the ground.

"There, Koku," said Tom, pointing. "If you can climb out there and pull or chop those two parts of the tree crotch apart, you may free us and we can back out. Are you strong enough?"

"Sure!" grunted the giant. "Me show."

Armed with a keen axe, Koku crawled out to the very edge of the platform, and went out of the ship through an emergency door. He climbed into the branches, braced his feet against one side of the Y in the tree and his back against the

other part, being above the damaged nose fender which was caught fast.

"Now me push!" cried Koku. Supporting himself by his hands, he took a long breath, and those aboard the craft could hear the fibers of the already cracked tree beginning to rend and tear. But still the nose of the ship was held as in a vise. Then he used the axe for several minutes.

"You bust, now!" commanded Koku, and it seemed as if he would break himself so terrific was the strain. "Bust, tree!" he shouted.

The great tree split down farther. The Y shaped opening became wider, and Tom, seeing this, called to a man he had left in the control cabin to signal for full speed astern.

The great propellers whirled, and with a tearing loose of the damaged fender, part of which remained in the tree, the *Silver Cloud* was at last free.

"What about Koku?" cried Ned, for the giant was left in the tangle of branches.

"I'll pick him up with a rope ladder," Tom said. Then he signaled to the giant to climb down and wait on a level place at the foot of the mountain.

It did not take long to ascertain that the dirigible was damaged no more than the tearing away of her nose fender, which in no way interfered with her maneuvering. So a little later, the *Silver*

Cloud hovering low over the level place, Koku was picked up, the fog having been driven away by a rising wind.

"That's pretty nifty!" Ned remarked, as Tom had the rope ladder lowered from a windlass and drum which wound up the ladder again when Koku was on the lower end. "It saves a lot of climbing."

"Yes," Tom said, "I thought he'd be tired after breaking that big tree."

Koku seemed to think nothing of his remarkable feat, but if it had not been for him it is probable that the craft might have been held there a long time until men with axes could have chopped down the forest giant.

"Well, that's another adventure to our credit," Tom said, as they reached the hangar that night. "And it gives me a new idea."

"What?" asked Ned.

"A nose fender that can be detached and dropped off by pulling a lever from within the ship," was the answer. "Then if we ram something again we shan't be held up until Koku can free us."

So this improvement was added to many others.

During the next week several other trial trips were made, though not to any great distance, and various improvements incorporated in the

big craft of the air. Though there were many accounts in the paper of Tom Swift's dirigible, no word came from the Jardine company.

One day Ned saw Tom carrying a large bouquet of flowers into the officers' cabin.

"What's the idea?" asked the manager. "Going to have a christening, Tom?"

"No. These are for Mary."

"Mary?"

"Yes. I've a desire to take a longer trip for this test flight, and sail over Mt. Camon. Then, if all goes well, I'll drop this bouquet and a note to the folks down by means of a little parachute. I thought it would surprise them."

"I'll say it will!" chuckled Ned. "Good for you! When are you going to start?"

"Pretty soon. Coming along?"

"Of course. You'd have to tie me to keep me back."

At the time agreed upon the *Silver Cloud* took off in good shape, rose steadily and easily, and was soon soaring on her way to the great forest reserve in the midst of which stood the hotel on Mt. Camon.

"It certainly is dry," observed Ned, as they flew low over a farming community and saw the arid fields, crops drying up, and, in many instances, farmers hauling water for their horses and cattle

"I don't see where the rain is keeping itself," Tom said. "It's as dry as a powder horn!"

The aviators made good time, and early that afternoon came in sight of the mountain summit on which the hotel stood.

"There it is!" cried Ned, who first sighted the resort. "Get the bouquet ready, Tom! Say, maybe you could make a landing on the ball field. Why don't you try?"

Tom turned the helm over to his chum for a moment and began making an observation through his binoculars.

CHAPTER XVII

MIDNIGHT VISITORS

"CAN you make a landing on that ball field?" Ned Newton asked, as the young inventor put aside the glasses and took over the steering wheel.

"I doubt it," was the answer. "It would be too much of a risk to try. That ball field is too small. Though I could make a safe landing in a big enough place without a landing crew by manipulating the gas pressure, I don't want to try it unless it's necessary. Might damage the airship, and then I'd be out a lot more money."

"That's right. Don't take any chances," agreed Ned, who, as befitted a financial manager, was rightfully cautious. "But they see us!" he exclaimed, as he and Tom saw crowds pouring from the hotel, some one having spread word of the sight of the big dirigible.

"Yes, I suppose Mary, dad, and Mr. and Mrs. Nestor are in that bunch," went on Tom. "I'll go a bit lower and maybe we can pick 'em out."

"Wonder if they take us for the *Graf Zeppelin?*" chuckled Ned.

"Oh, dad would know this boat," Tom answered. "I fancy Mrs. Jardine would, too, for the last time I talked to her she had a small sketch of it she said her brother-in-law had given her."

"Is Mrs. Jardine still at this hotel?"

"Oh, yes; she and her children. Mary has become quite friendly with them, she wrote me."

The big dirigible was now just drifting along, the motors having been stopped, and was slowly settling toward the hotel. On the green lawn in front of the hotel the guests had assembled in great excitement. It was so still and quiet, with the machinery cut off, that the cheers of the hotel people could be heard.

"There's Mary!" Tom exclaimed, pointing out a group of persons detached from the others.

"Yes, I see Mr. Damon, too!" ejaculated Ned. "Look! He's swinging his hat!"

"He'll be standing on his head next, he's so easily excited," laughed Tom. "I see dad, too! Hand me that bouquet, Ned!"

The bunch of flowers, to which Tom had fastened a little note for his wife, was attached to a small parachute and at the proper time was dropped through a trapdoor opening in the bottom of the main cabin, back of the control room. There was very little wind, and as the *Silver*

Cloud hovered over the hotel Tom, Ned, and the others could see the flowers gently floating down. They fell within a short distance of Mary. Mr. Damon was seen to run and pick them up, and then, observing the note with Mary's name, he handed them to her.

The air was so clear and the big, floating airship was so close to earth that in the silence which followed the dropping of the flowers, Tom could hear his wife call up to him:

"Thank you!"

Then there was a burst of applause over the clever and romantic feat, and Tom waved his hand to his wife, blowing her a kiss from his fingers, though she may not have seen that action.

To give the guests a good view of the wonderful ship, Tom slowly circled over the hotel several times. Then, to show what his craft could do, he speeded up the motors and raced along at roaring speed. He was higher in the air now, however, and could not make out individuals on the ground.

"Too bad we couldn't land," remarked Ned, as, with three dips of her "nose," Tom made the *Silver Cloud* wave a final farewell salute to his wife and the others.

"Yes," the young inventor agreed. "But I think this airship is about finished now, and I'm going to lock her in the hanger and take my vacation."

"So you think you'll have to keep her yourself,

do you?" asked Ned. "I mean, have you given up the idea of trying to sell the dirigible?"

"I'd be glad to have the government, the Jardines, or any one else buy the *Silver Cloud* if we could get out of it with a decent profit," Tom said. "As it is, she's a white elephant on my hands. But we've certainly had no offers for her or even inquiries about her. So I'll just park her after I make a few more changes and give her a last hard test."

The trip back to Shopton was without incident, save that one of the motors cut out on account of ignition trouble. But those remaining were more than sufficient to drive the craft along, and she was soon safely housed.

Tom Swift went to his office to make some notes on the trip, incorporating in them suggestions to Mr. Jackson for certain changes, while Ned went over some accounts and tried to think of some way of making the *Silver Cloud* a profitable venture for the Swift firm.

It was past midnight and all was quiet in the office. The plant was shut down and only the watchmen were making their various rounds to be sure all was well.

Tom was writing a letter to Mary, intending to post it on his way home with Ned, when the latter, giving up with a sigh of regret an attempt to

figure some way out of the financial puzzle, suddenly murmured:

"Hark!"

"What to?" Tom asked.

"I thought I heard some one coming along the hall."

"The watchman, probably."

"The watchman wouldn't walk on his tiptoes like a thief," whispered Ned. "I believe we are going to have unexpected visitors."

Tom Swift quietly left his seat at the desk and moved softly across the room to the door. He opened it suddenly and as he did so there was a scurrying rush of feet. As Ned leaped to join his chum and Tom switched on a light in the corridor, they saw two dark forms vanishing around a turn.

"Come on!" cried Tom. "We've got to catch them!"

CHAPTER XVIII

THE ESCAPE

FOLLOWING Tom Swift out into the corridor, Ned Newton paused long enough to throw an emergency switch that flooded the different yards of the plant with brilliant electric light. At the same time alarm bells were set ringing in the various places where the different watchmen had their stations for the night.

"Stop! Hold on! Who are you?" shouted Tom, as he raced after the midnight visitors who had approached so stealthily but who had left in such a hurry when discovered.

There was no answer, naturally, and when Tom and Ned reached the turn in the hall, around which the two had disappeared, the fugitives were not in sight.

"We've got to get them!" cried Tom. "I've got to know what this means!"

"Looks as if some of the gangs that bothered us in the past were up to their old tricks," commented Ned. "But wasn't one of those fellows the dwarf, Tom?"

"I thought so; but I couldn't be sure, coming out of the lighted office as I did."

"The other fellow walked like Jardine," went on Ned. "But what would he be doing here, coming in like a thief?"

"I can't imagine," Tom said, "unless he hoped to appeal to me to let him have a share in the dirigible in spite of what his brother has said."

"He's just about crazy enough for that," agreed Ned. "But how did he and the dwarf get in without some of the watchmen seeing them?"

"That's what we've got to find out," decided Tom.

The mystery was solved a little later when at a gate on the north side of the plant, one seldom used, the watchman was found unconscious. Though when revived he was not found to be in the least injured. He told a strange tale.

Shortly before midnight, he said, when he was returning from punching one of his clocks, two men, one a dwarf, approached the gate and asked to be directed to a certain small town about ten miles away. They were in a car the engine of which was left running at the side of the road.

Suspecting nothing, the watchman, who had received the first inquiry from behind his wicket gate, opened it and came out. In an instant he was caught by the dwarf, a handkerchief saturated with some powerful chemical was pressed over

his face, and he knew nothing more until revived by Tom and Ned.

"Jardine and the dwarf sneaked in here for some trick," decided Tom. "Maybe they didn't expect to find you and me in the office so late, Ned."

"But what was their game, Tom?"

"Hanged if I know."

"Maybe they wanted to steal the dirigible!"

"Jardine would be crazier than I think he is to try anything like that. But he may have hoped to damage the ship in revenge for what has happened. It's a mystery."

A careful search of the plant revealed nothing wrong, and the watchman at the dirigible hangar said he had seen nothing of the midnight callers. They had made their escape, probably through the gate where the watchman lay unconscious.

"I wish the *Silver Cloud* was off my hands," complained Tom, as he and Ned left the plant after additional watchmen had been summoned from their homes near by and stationed about the place. "It's a big success mechanically, but I can't make any real use of it."

"It's certainly eaten into your money and I'm afraid is shaking our credit a bit. We'll have to retrench as much as possible for a while if you can't sell it," declared Ned.

The next day a careful check-up all over the plant revealed nothing wrong, and a further test of the dirigible showed it to be almost perfect.

"I want to get a little speed out of her, and then I'll be satisfied," Tom said when the airship had been returned to the hangar after a short voyage around Shopton.

"Can you do it?" asked Ned.

"I think so," was the answer. "And, Ned, I wish you'd write another letter to Lawrence Jardine, offering him a little better terms if he will buy the *Silver Cloud*. I'm willing to take a small loss on her if I can get it out of the way. I need the hangar for another type of craft I have in mind."

"All right, I'll try to get in touch with Jardine," promised Ned. "But he's a queer bird—not as queer as his brother, but as hard as nails."

It was the day after this, when Tom was giving orders to have the *Silver Cloud* groomed for a final and most severe test of all, which was to take place with a full load of passengers and crew, that Ned Newton, reading the paper, gave a whistle of surprise.

"What's the matter?" asked Tom. "Has Jardine sent word that he will buy the ship?"

"No. But read that!"

He indicated a small item which Tom took in at a glance. It stated that a man named Cosso

Tobini had escaped from the jail in a small town near the Mt. Camon hotel.

"Tobini!" cried Tom. "Why, that's the crazy gardener who wanted to knock down Mr. Damon."

"Sure!" assented Ned. "And the one you told me chased the hotel manager with a knife."

"That's the fellow," went on Tom. "A bad bird!"

"Well," Ned remarked, "I suppose he'll be after that manager's scalp now."

"Shouldn't wonder," Tom assented, and then a worried look came over his face.

"What's the matter?" Ned asked.

"I was just thinking," said Tom slowly. "I suppose this crazy Tobini may want to take another crack at Mr. Thorndyke or at Mr. Damon. And if he's insane, as I really believe, he may fly into a rage against anybody—Mary or her parents or dad. I wish he was back in jail!" and Tom Swift began to pace nervously up and down.

CHAPTER XIX

THE FOREST OF FIRE

AFTER reading of the escape of Cosso Tobini from jail, Tom Swift somewhat relieved the anxiety of his mind by getting in touch with the Mt. Camon hotel on the long distance telephone and talking to Mary. Without unduly alarming her, he told her of the escape of the madman, of which, however, she was already aware, and begged her to be careful.

"Oh, Tom dear," said his wife, with a little laugh that echoed musically over the wire, "don't worry! I'm all right. I have your own dear father to look after me, as well as mother and dad."

"Yes, but be careful just the same," advised Tom. "And tell Mr. Damon to watch out!"

"I will. But, bless my powder puff, as Mr. Damon might say, I'm sure there is no danger. Mr. Thorndyke, the manager, told us not to worry, that if Tobini came on the hotel grounds he would be immediately arrested."

"It didn't seem to do much good to arrest that

bird before," said Tom. "Better put him in a stronger jail next time."

"I'll have that attended to," promised Mary, with a laugh. "Now tell me about yourself and the big dirigible."

"We're both all right, and so is Ned," Tom answered, not speaking of his worries over the financing of the great airship.

"When are you coming up again, Tom?"

"Oh, pretty soon," was the answer. "Then I'll take a long vacation with you and the folks."

"That will be lovely," his wife murmured.

Neither of them realized how soon Tom Swift would appear on the scene nor under what tragic circumstances.

"Well, good-bye," called Tom into the instrument. "Do you?"

"Of course I do!" said Mary earnestly. "Do you?"

"With all my heart!"

"Talking in cryptograms?" chuckled Ned.

"None of your business!" snapped Tom, and he blushed even under his coat of tan.

The day came when the *Silver Cloud* was to be given the most severe test since her construction. Up to now only a skeleton crew had been carried on the different trips, and there had not been a full load of gas and oil. No passengers at all had been taken up, the accommodations for the

fifty that could be transported remaining vacant.

Now Tom Swift planned to go aloft with a full crew, enough gas, oil, and other supplies as if for a ten thousand mile trip, and he would have as his guests fifty persons from in and around Shopton. Some of the plant executives were to be allowed to bring such members of their families as they chose and the mayor and officials of the town were to get invitations.

"It will be some party!" predicted Ned. "Going to serve lunch?"

"Oh, sure! I want you to ask the newspapers to send some reporters along, if they wish, and newspaper men always like to eat."

"Sure!" chuckled Ned. "And smoke, too. How about that? Will you permit smoking?"

"In certain rooms, yes. But they will be insulated from the danger of setting fire to the lifting gas. Not that it would explode like hydrogen, but I must take no chances."

"You'd better not if I'm going along!" warned Ned, with a laugh.

There was great excitement in Shopton when a number of the townspeople, including the mayor and other officials, received word to assemble at the Swift plant on a certain morning, there to go aboard the *Silver Cloud* for a trip through the air.

There were many who would have given a

large sum to be of the selected ones, but there were limits even to the big dirigible, though Tom promised his many friends, who had known him since boyhood, that at a later date he would give them all a ride.

With his various officers, Mr. Jackson, and the head workmen from the Swift manufacturing plant, Tom Swift went carefully over every part of the big craft. The weather reports had been collected by Mr. Larson and there were no adverse conditions for several hundred miles around, so Tom felt that his dirigible would give a good account of herself.

"Though I almost wish we would run into a storm," he told Ned. "It would give the newspaper men something to write about."

"Some of 'em might be too sick to write," chuckled Ned, for though the *Silver Cloud* was very steady at most times, it could not be denied that she rolled and pitched in a powerful wind, and the feeling of new passengers was somewhat akin to seasickness.

"All ready?" called Tom from the navigating cabin when all the guests and the crew had assembled on board.

"All clear!" answered the captain of the ground crew.

"Walk her out!" Tom ordered.

The sun began to gleam on the silver-colored oralum plates of the big dirigible.

At last she was free from the hangar, and as the young inventor began to increase the power of the lifting gas, she tugged at her mooring and ground ropes like some great creature eager to be free that she might float in the blue space above.

"Let go!" cried Tom.

The ropes were cast off, the ship hesitated for a moment, seemed to quiver like a race horse, and then went up amid the cheers of the crowd that had gathered to see the final test.

The great propellers roared and throbbed, the nose of the *Silver Cloud* was pointed to the north, and away she went, gathering speed every moment until at last she was high above the throngs and like a silver thread in the vast blue space all around her.

"Perfect!" exclaimed Ned, who, in the control cabin with Tom, had observed the take-off.

"As nearly so as it's possible to make her," agreed the young inventor. "Now, if nothing goes wrong, I'll show this crowd and those newspaper boys something!"

From then on the young inventor put his craft through her paces to the limit. She shot up to a great height. She went down until it seemed as

if she must hit the earth and some of the faces went a little white. But at the right time Tom pulled the elevating rudders and the ship went up again, high above the clouds. Then he circled, went straight away at a pace of over a hundred and fifty miles an hour, and, as a final stunt, skimmed over a great lake, two hundred miles from Shopton.

There, hovering in the air like some queer balloon and with the blue water sparkling beneath, lunch was served on board and Tom presided as host. He was cheered to the echo.

"This is the best thing you've ever done, Mr. Swift," said a New York newspaper reporter who had seen some of Tom's other strange machines.

"I'm glad you think so," was the modest answer.

Tom had but one regret—that Mary and his father were not along to witness his triumph. But he planned to have them on board later.

The trip was a success in every way. Not a mishap marred the supreme test, and when the ship went back to her hangar that night, papers containing reports of what had happened on board were already being sold in Shopton. The *Silver Cloud* carried a wireless telephone outfit that could be tuned in to the proper instruments on the ground.

The next day's morning papers printed pages

of the wonderful success of the *Silver Cloud*, and as Tom and Ned sat reading them in Tom's private office, Ned remarked casually:

"Maybe Lawrence Jardine will change his mind now, pay for this ship, Tom, and buy her."

"I think he's too stubborn," Tom remarked. "At the same time, I wish I could sell her at a profit. I really don't know what to do with her. But I think it's useless to appeal to Lawrence Jardine again. I wonder what's become of him, anyhow?"

Hardly had he spoken when there was the sound of an auto coming along the road at a reckless pace. Tom and Ned saw a big machine, containing a chauffeur and a man at the sight of whom Ned exclaimed:

"Talk of the old Nick—here's Lawrence Jardine now! And he's coming here! Looks as if something was up!"

Jardine leaped from the machine as it came to such a sudden stop that the tires shrilly protested. He rushed into Tom's office, his face showing some terrible emotion.

"What's the matter?" Tom asked.

"Help!" gasped Lawrence Jardine. "The hotel at Mt. Camon is surrounded by a forest of fire! They'll all perish! Can't you do something? An airplane? My wife and children!"

He fell in a faint at Tom Swift's feet.

"What did he say?" cried Ned, who had lingered behind Tom.

"Something about a forest on fire—at Mt. Camon!"

"The woods—dry as tinder!" exclaimed Ned. "A forest fire! But we haven't heard of such a thing!"

"Quick!" gasped Tom. "Get me some water. I must revive him and find out what he means! The hotel surrounded by a forest of fire! And Mary's there! And dad! Mr. Jardine, wake up! Tell me more! What do you mean?"

Tom Swift fell to shaking the unconscious figure as Ned dashed back into the office for water.

CHAPTER XX

SPEEDING THROUGH THE AIR

"Looks as if he were coming around," said Ned Newton in a low voice, as he bent over Lawrence Jardine.

"Yes," assented the young inventor, raising the man's head and pouring a little more water between his lips. "He went out cold."

"I'll get some aromatic spirits of ammonia from the doctor's office," went on Ned. In the plant of the Swift Construction Company there was always more or less danger of accidents, and there were a resident physician and nurse in constant attendance, as is the case in most large establishments employing much help.

Ned came back with the spirits of ammonia and this, administered to the unconscious man, completed the restoration that nature had already undertaken when he fell.

"Are they safe?" Jardine gasped, looking around as Tom supported his head on his knee. "Did you save them?"

"Who?" asked Tom, almost before he thought.

"My wife and children in the Mt. Camon hotel! They are surrounded by a ring of fire! Oh, no—they can't be saved! I just heard the news! Then I rushed here. If any one can save them—save all the doomed ones—it must be you, Tom Swift!"

"Tell me about it!" demanded the young inventor. "Talk fast! If there's a big fire, there's no time to lose!"

"It is a big fire," gasped Mr. Jardine, gradually recovering himself and slumping into a chair Ned brought forward. "The whole forest surrounding the hotel is blazing!"

"How do you know?"

"I had a long distance call from my wife. She was in terror. Even as she talked, I could hear men and women and children in the rooms about her shouting and crying and screaming in fright. It's awful!"

Tom Swift's thoughts went to Mary and the others in the hotel. He wanted to rush forth and save them, but first he must know exactly what to do. Eagerly he and Ned questioned Mr. Jardine for particulars.

"I have been stopping in Mansburg on some business," went on the head of the Jardine firm. "It was there, not a half hour ago, that I received the telephone message from my wife. She said there was a trail of fire in the forest, completely surrounding the hotel. As you know, it's

in the midst of a dense forest with no open tracts for miles to check the progress of the flames."

"How did the fire start?" Tom cried.

"My wife didn't say. But she said the woods were as dry as tinder and that the fire was sweeping up from the bottom of the mountain at a terrible rate! Oh, you must do something!"

"Did your wife tell you anything else?" Tom wanted to know.

"She begged me to hurry up there and save them; but it's a two days' trip in a fast auto, and in the end an auto couldn't reach them."

"Why don't they appeal for help to places near them?" asked Ned.

"They have, my wife said. The fire wardens are all out and have sworn in all the deputies they can muster. But the fire is terrible! There never was such a big one! Oh, we must do something!"

Tom dashed away, leaving Ned to minister to the visitor who, however, seemed to have fully recovered from his faint. But he was very weak and excited.

"Where's he going?" asked the metal manufacturer, observing Tom.

"To a telephone, I guess," was Ned's answer. A moment later from Tom's private office came the words:

"Long distance—in a hurry—it's a case of life or death!"

He got long distance and gave his number. Then, after a short pause, Ned and Mr. Jardine heard him jiggle the hook and appeal to central to hurry and put through the call. There was again a period of tense silence, and then Tom repeated in a dull voice:

"Oh—they don't answer. All—all right!"

The receiver clicked back on the hook and Tom rejoined Ned and Mr. Jardine.

"The wires are down," Tom reported. "Burned, I suppose."

"Then we must do something at once!" cried Ned.

"Yes," agreed Tom. "We must get there as quickly as we can."

He looked at his watch and glanced about the lower office as if seeking something.

"Take me with you!" pleaded Jardine. "That's why I raced to get here in my car. I want to go with you, Tom Swift!"

"Just a moment," said Tom, raising a restraining hand for silence. "I must think what is best to do. This is terrible!"

"Can't you go to Mt. Camon in the big dirigible?" asked Mr. Jardine. "That will take you there as quickly as anything else. In that perhaps you can save my family—and yours," he added after a moment of hesitation. "Oh, Tom Swift, you must do something!"

"I will, Mr. Jardine. But I must make some plans. Though the gas in the dirigible is not as explosive as that generally made use of, I don't know that I dare risk sailing over a forest of fire in the machine. Let me think a moment!"

He paced the floor with nervous energy. Then he called to Ned:

"Go out and tell Blake to get the *Wasp* ready." This was a small monoplane, very speedy, carrying two.

"Will you take me?" cried Mr. Jardine.

"Impossible—in the *Wasp*," Tom said. "I must first see what the situation is before I can decide what to do. The forest fire will burn fast, but my *Wasp* will fly faster, and once I get a view of the burning forests I can decide how to act to save the hotel people."

"My wife is there—my children, too!"

"My wife is there," said Tom softly, "and my father. Also some dear friends. I will save them if possible. But first Ned Newton and I will go up in the little plane. It will not take more than an hour."

"An hour, man! They may burn to death in that time."

"I hope not—I think not," Tom answered. "Anyhow, it is the only way. I must see if it is possible to use the dirigible. Hurry, Ned!"

But Ned Newton was already on his way to

have the *Wasp* run from the hangar, and a few minutes later he and Tom climbed into the cockpit.

"Wait here until I return!" Tom ordered. "You could never get there in your car, Mr. Jardine."

"Oh, but Mr. Swift! Take me! I'll hang on outside!"

"Impossible!"

"Then get me another plane!"

"I have no other ready that could make the round trip in time. We may need you later, so wait here and I will do all I can."

"Yes! Yes! You must, Tom Swift!"

As the *Wasp* roared lightly and at great speed through the air, under the guiding hand of the young inventor, Tom Swift's heart was like lead, for he wondered what was the fate of his wife, his father, and the others.

CHAPTER XXI

IN DIRE PERIL

GAYETY and merriment were twin spirits in possession at the big hotel on top of Mt. Camon. The establishment was crowded to capacity with guests, young and old, and all were enjoying themselves to the utmost. It had been a glorious day—a day filled with the pleasure of strolls in the wooded recesses of the forest, with games of tennis and baseball on the spacious grounds, and now, in the evening, after a bountiful dinner, the men, women, and children were gathered in the big ballroom to witness another clever marionette performance.

Pietro Notine and his charming wife with her radiant smile had been asked to play a return engagement of their puppets at the Mt. Camon resort and had been only too glad to do so.

"It is with so much pleasure that I greet you again," said the Italian puppet master to Mary Swift, as he got ready to go on with the little marionette play.

"And your so helpful husband, he is not here?" asked Mrs. Notine, with her warm smile.

"No, he's hard at work on that big dirigible of his," Mary answered.

"He was so good to us," murmured the marionette master's wife as she went behind the scenes of the miniature stage to manipulate the strings of the puppets with her husband. "Had it not been for him, our summer tour would have failed. Please make my remembrances to him."

"I will," promised Mary.

Then the little play went on, to the great delight of the children and the no small pleasure of the adults. There was music by the hotel orchestra and the evening came to a close with a small, informal dance following the entertainment.

Mary was standing out on the veranda of the hotel, to get a little fresh air before going to bed. She was talking to her mother.

"Is Tom coming up soon?" Mrs. Nestor asked.

"Yes," Mary replied. "And I shall be so glad!"

From the other side of the veranda, she heard her father say:

"You haven't seen anything more of that crazy gardener who wanted to stop you from picking roses, have you, Mr. Damon?"

"No. And, bless my insurance policy, I don't want to, either! I guess he left these parts after

he broke jail. It wouldn't be healthy for him to stay around here after——"

Mr. Damon's voice trailed off, and he arose, went to the edge of the big veranda, and looked down the wooded slope. There was something so odd and startling in his manner that Mary and her mother left their seats and walked toward him as Mr. Nestor asked:

"What's the matter? What do you see?"

"A fire," Mr. Damon replied. "Some one has started a bonfire down there in the woods, and it's a bad thing to do with the dry weather we've had. The trees and bushes are like tinder. That's a very foolish thing to do! I think I had better notify the manager. That fire is too close to this hotel. Look!"

He pointed out some flickering flames which showed plainly in the blackness of the dense forest.

"Some campers, probably," suggested Mary. "But it's a good way off."

"Still, fire can travel fast!" observed Mr. Damon, and there was an anxious tone to his voice. "I don't like it!"

As they watched, the flames spread with alarming rapidity, creeping out in two long lines as if from a central point. At the same time a cry arose from the other side of the hotel, where there was also a veranda.

"Fire! Fire! There's a big fire down the side of the mountain!"

"Bless my——" began Mr. Damon, but he did not take time to finish. With Mr. Nestor, he ran around to the other veranda. Mary and her mother followed, having seen the first little blaze they had noticed spread out into an alarming trail of flames.

On the other side of the hotel it was the same. It seemed as if the woods on the east and west of the place had simultaneously broken out into a dangerous conflagration, and in a short time the two lines of flames crept north and south, until it seemed they would soon meet and form an encircling ring of fire about the hotel, though several miles down the mountain.

"This is terrible!" cried Mr. Damon. "Awful!"

"It is a bad forest fire," agreed Mr. Nestor. "I never saw a fire spread so rapidly! Hark!"

Blasts from an air siren echoed in the quiet of the night. It was the danger signal from a fire warden's station. A little wind began to blow, and it wafted to the nostrils of the hotel guests the odor of gasoline.

"Some car must have had an accident and caught fire," said Mr. Nestor. "It has scattered the burning gas along the road that runs through the woods below and all around the hotel."

"An automobile!" ejaculated Mary. Her

thoughts went in a flash to Tom and his House on Wheels. Could he have been coming up in that?

The excitement spread rapidly throughout the hotel, and guests who had gone early to bed hurriedly dressed and came down. All were greatly alarmed and there was some talk of getting things together and departing, even though it was now midnight.

"There is no danger," Mr. Thorndyke told his people. "Do not be alarmed. It is true that the woods are on fire, as they have been before. But the wardens and their men will soon have the fire out. Do not be alarmed."

But for all his words there was great alarm, and some of the guests became a bit hysterical.

Mrs. Notine was standing near Mary and her people.

"It looks like a bad fire," said the puppet master's wife. "I am so afraid of fires—ever since that wicked dwarf tried to burn our little traveling theater. I hope he had nothing to do with this."

"You mean that dwarf my husband hired—Chock?" asked Mary.

"Jim Chock? Yes. He seems to have a mania for fires."

"What would he be doing up here?" Mary asked wonderingly.

"I do not know. I only hope he had no hand in this. I must go to help my husband pack the puppets. We shall leave in our van if this fire gets worse."

"You can't leave, I'm afraid," Mr. Damon said. "At least not now."

"Why not?"

"Because the fire is completely about the hotel, as you can see. It is some distance away and probably will not come here. But until the circle of flames is broken you cannot get through."

"Oh, but we must get away!" cried Mrs. Notine. "I shall go tell my husband!"

As she hurried off, there was some excitement around one of the lower entrances to the hotel—at a basement door directly under Mary Swift and her people, who stood on the veranda watching the ever increasing flames below them.

Mary saw a man stagger through the light which streamed out of the basement toward a group of hotel employees. He was a man who had evidently just come off a tank automobile containing oil or gasoline, for his clothes bore unmistakable evidences of that occupation. There was some excited talk, and, evidently, Mr. Thorndyke had been sent for, for a moment later Mary, leaning over the edge of the veranda, saw the manager talking to the oil man.

"What is it?" asked the manager.

"Danger! That's what it is!" cried the man. "A little while ago, as I was driving up here with a tank of oil and gas for your place, I was stopped by a man with a red light who leaped out into the road from the bushes and waved it at me. I thought there was some obstruction ahead, and I got down to ask him about it. Then he jumped at me and knocked me out."

"Knocked you out?"

"Yes, unconscious. Slammed a rock on my head. When I came to I saw him driving away with my tank auto and the cocks were open. Oil and gas was running out all over the road."

"Gasoline!" cried the hotel manager.

"Yes, and oil," went on the driver, whose head was bleeding. "I yelled to the fellow, but he kept on driving with the cocks open, and a little later I saw a spurt of flame and I knew the oil and gas had caught fire—or had been set."

"This is awful!" gasped Mr. Thorndyke, and murmured cries of alarm came from the hotel workers. "We are surrounded by fire!"

It was only too true. The flames were rapidly spreading, started by the oil and gasoline and now fed by the tinder of trees, dried leaves, and bushes of the forest.

"It was the work of some madman!" cried Mr. Damon, when he and the other guests heard what

had happened. "The state police should be informed!"

"An alarm has been given," said Mr. Thorndyke, going about and trying to calm his guests. "The fire wardens are summoning help from all over."

This was evidenced by the weird screaming of the air sirens located here and there on the mountain. But the fire was spreading fast and the forest for miles around the big hotel was in flames. Something very like panic spread among the guests in spite of the efforts of the manager and some of the cooler guests to keep it in check.

"What can we do?" Mr. Nestor asked of Mr. Damon, as their party stood on a corner of the veranda, looking at the spreading flames, as yet far below them but inexorably creeping nearer.

"We ought to get away from here!" said Mr. Damon. "There are cars in the garage, and if we can't take all our things we can take some."

"How can we get through that ring of fire?" asked Mr. Nestor, pointing to it. "Out of the question! We can only wait until the fire fighters beat out the flames on a path by which we can get through. We are safer here than we would be down there."

"It is coming nearer," said his wife.

"Yes," he admitted in a grave voice, "it is coming nearer!"

Mrs. Jardine swept up to the group.

"I am going to telephone my husband by long distance," she announced.

"What good will that do?" Mr. Nestor asked.

"I don't know. But I must tell him that we are in danger—we, his wife and children and all of us are in grave danger."

She hurried toward the office. The air was now beginning to be acrid with smoke and odors from the burning trees.

"For that matter I might telephone Tom," said Mary in a low voice. "But what good would it do?"

"Nothing can do any good until the wardens and their men put out the fire all about us," her father said.

Helpless and alarmed, the guests paced the verandas or walked nervously about the grounds adjacent to the hotel. Mrs. Jardine came hurrying back to Mary and her people. It was now beginning to get daylight.

"I got my husband on the wire!" exclaimed the woman. "I told him we were surrounded by flames and asked him if there was no way to get help to us to rescue us."

"What did he say?" asked Mary.

"I couldn't hear him very well in the first place, and then the wire was suddenly broken or cut."

"Or burned through," said Mr. Damon.

They looked at one another helplessly in the smoke and flame-reddened light of the early morning. Just then there was a piercing cry of alarm from an outer wing of the hotel. As all ran in that direction they saw a big mass of flame and cinder come sailing through the air from the forest of fire down below. This flaming mass fell into a great pine tree, not far from the hotel, and in a moment the pine was a glowing torch of fire.

"I'm afraid this is the beginning of the end," said Mr. Nestor solemnly, as he stood close to his wife and daughter.

"Quick! Run out the hose!" commanded Mr. Thorndyke to his emergency fire-fighting squad. "The hotel will catch from that burning pine if we don't put it out! Hurry!"

CHAPTER XXII

A MESSAGE OF HOPE

"THERE's the fire all right!" shouted Tom Swift to Ned Newton, who was riding in the cockpit of the *Wasp* behind him as they circled over the mountain.

"Burning fast!" remarked Ned. "It's a big blaze."

"It hasn't reached the hotel yet," went on Tom. "If the wind holds this way it may not."

Ned looked down with appraising eyes. He wanted to keep Tom's spirits up, for he knew much would depend on the young inventor if he was to save his wife, his father, and others imperiled at the hotel surrounded by fire, and yet Tom must know the full extent of the danger.

"The wind holding one way won't do much good when the fire is all around the hotel—as it is," Ned remarked.

"That's so," agreed Tom. "This is awful!"

They had made a quick trip from Shopton in the speedy little airplane, leaving Lawrence Jar-

dine, frantic and half crazed with anxiety, to await their return.

It was now close to noon, and in the broad light of day great clouds of smoke billowing over the mountain on which the hotel was situated could be seen. With the smoke were long flashes of fire.

"Better head up a bit, Tom!" called Ned to Tom, as they started down when almost over the hotel. "Here comes a lot of smoke."

The wind was blowing a great cloud of hot, white, acrid vapor toward the *Wasp*, and Tom shifted the controls which speedily sent the fast craft up above into a clearer atmosphere. There a broader view could be had of the great forest fire. Its proportions amazed Tom and his chum.

"The whole place will go!" cried Ned.

"Looks so," agreed Tom. "But we've got to do something to save them—save my family and the others!"

"There's the hotel!" cried Ned, as another shift of the wind dispersed the hovering clouds of smoke and revealed the big hostelry plainly.

With a sudden movement of the stick, Tom Swift sent his airplane down until he and Ned could make out men, women, and children circling about the buildings. It was as though they sought a way through the ever narrowing ring of fire.

"Take control, Ned!" Tom suddenly called, for the *Wasp* was fitted for dual management.

"What are you going to do?" Ned asked.

"Write a note and drop it down there for Mary!" Tom replied. "Some one will pick it up and give it to her."

"A note?" Ned questioned, as he grasped the levers.

"Yes. I must warn her and the others not to try to get down the mountain. They'll only run into the fire which is all around them."

"But they've got to get away!" cried Ned. "The fire is sweeping up toward the hotel!"

"Yes, I know. But they can't be saved that way."

"How can they be saved?"

"Only by the big dirigible, Ned. We'll go back and get it and fly it here. I can be up here with it in a few hours. I want to keep Mary and the others in or around the hotel until then. It is their only chance. If they try to go down the mountain, it means death!"

"And a horrible death!" murmured Ned.

Tom quickly wrote the note. He weighted it with a spare bolt and fastened it to his handkerchief by the four corners so that, in effect, he had a small parachute. Then, watching his chance, while Ned directed the *Wasp* over the ball field and while the crowd of fear-stricken guests be-

low watched, Tom Swift dropped his message of hope.

"We will save you if it can be done," Tom had written to his wife. "Do not try to get through the forest. The fire is everywhere."

He saw the note with its handkerchief parachute land on the ball field and several run to pick it up. Tom could not distinguish his wife, his father, or the Nestors, but he had no doubt that they were there, as Mary and Mr. Swift must have recognized the *Wasp*. It was painted in distinctive colors and bore the Swift trademark on the underside of its wings.

"That's all we can do now," Tom remarked, as he again took charge.

"What's next?" Ned wanted to know.

"Back to Shopton to get the big dirigible!" said Tom. "It's the only way to save them."

"If you try to land her down there, in that circle of fire, she'll explode her gas!" exclaimed Ned.

"I'm not going to land," Tom said.

"How else can you make any rescues?"

"I have a plan," was all Tom said, and he pointed the nose of the *Wasp* toward Shopton. Never before had the machine been sent through the air so fast.

As Tom Swift and Ned Newton flew away from the mountain of fire, they could see, down below them, hundreds of forest rangers and their crews and neighborhood men fighting desperately to stem the tide of the flames or to block them from eating their way up to the summit where the hotel was perched.

Trenches were being dug in the earth, and the soil was being spread over the carpet of leaves and pine needles in which the fire ate its way along the ground to break out in a dozen new spots.

Hundreds of men, with flails made from burlap bags dipped into water brought from a distance, were beating out spots of flame here and there. Above all hovered that choking pall of smoke.

"Wonder how that fire started?" murmured Tom.

"Some careless camper, probably," was Ned's opinion.

"There must have been a hundred campers to make the fire spread so rapidly and in so big a circle," said Tom. "No, it was some other cause than a camper." As yet he and Ned had not heard the story of the oil tank driver.

They made a quick landing in the yard near the shop where Tom had his office and not far from the hangar of the big dirigible.

"Well, have you seen them? Are they safe?"

cried Lawrence Jardine, as he rushed frantically out of Tom's office where he had been impatiently awaiting the return of the *Wasp*.

"I have seen them," gasped Tom Swift. "But they are far from safe! They are in great danger!" He rapidly told what he and Ned had observed.

"They must be saved!" cried Mr. Jardine. "Use the big dirigible, Mr. Swift. Save my wife and children and I will do anything in the world for you—anything!" He held out his hands appealingly.

"I will do my best," said Tom. "I want to save my own family as well as yours. I also want to save the other people."

"How can you do it?"

"By using the big dirigible. It is the only way. It may cost us the airship and our lives, even to make the attempt above that awful forest of fire, but it is the only way."

"I'm with you! Tell me what to do!" cried Mr. Jardine.

"We must work fast," Tom said. "Luckily, the ship is ready to take the air, but I must rig up a device for getting the people on board. I shall not be able to descend to the ground. I'll need a crew. I must call for volunteers among my men. Those who go in the *Silver Cloud* to the forest of fire may never come back. Each man risks his life.

I will ask no man to go—they must volunteer!"

The alarm signal was sounded, bringing the men from the distant shops, and when they were assembled in the big yard Tom rapidly told them the circumstances and spoke of the great danger.

"Will some of you go with me to the rescue?" he asked.

There was a moment of hesitation. Then, from the outer edge of the crowd of workmen, a voice cried:

"Count me in."

A little man—a dwarf—wriggled through the press and stood before Tom Swift.

"Chock!" cried the young inventor.

"At your service!" said the dwarf, with his grotesque smile. "Oh, I know I acted like a fool, Mr. Swift," he hastened to say as he saw objection on Tom's face. "But I did nothing wrong to you or yours, and I can prove it. Let me make amends by being the first to volunteer. I'm not afraid!"

Tom hesitated, but in that instant out stepped Koku from where he towered above the other men.

"Little man um go—big man um go!" cried the giant. "I be volteer too! Giant and dwarf both go!" He stood beside Chock, the contrast being grotesque and almost laughable in spite of the tragic situation. Then there broke out a cheer

from the workmen and voices here and there cried:

"I'll go!"

"Count on me!"

"Don't leave me out!"

"We're all with you, Mr. Swift!"

In a few minutes a volunteer crew had been selected and Tom began to issue his orders.

"Are you really going to take that dwarf?" asked Ned.

"Of course," Tom answered. "Perhaps I have done him an injustice, or it may have all been Martin Jardine's fault. But I'll take Chock. He saved the day by volunteering first. He started the others. Now I've got to get the cage ready."

"Cage? What cage?"

"A big metal cage that can be lowered from the dirigible by a chain and windlass to save those at the hotel. It is the only way!"

CHAPTER XXIII

THE METAL CAGE

THERE was so much to do and in such a rush, that for two hours Ned Newton had no chance to talk further with Tom Swift about the desirability of taking along the dwarf Chock. When at last, after the metal cage was being hurried to completion, Ned made the inquiry, Tom said:

"That dwarf with his small frame and immense strength may be of great service to us. In a way, he may be as good as Koku."

"But can you trust him?" asked Ned.

"That I'll find out right away," said Tom. "I've got a few seconds now to catch my breath, and we'll settle the question. Whether or not he tried to play tricks on me, in conjunction with Martin Jardine, I have a kindly feeling toward the dwarf, for he appeared in the nick of time and started the volunteers."

"Yes," agreed Ned. "I wonder why he appeared as he did—in the nick of time? Can Martin Jardine be hanging around?"

"We'll find out if we can," Tom said, and sent Eradicate to tell Mr. Jackson to have Chock appear in the private office.

The dwarf came, sweaty and dirty, for he seemed to have been laboring like a Trojan.

"Chock," began Tom abruptly, "while I'm glad to admit you did me a service by volunteering, I needn't tell you that your conduct up to now has been very suspicious, and more than once I think you have been trying to gain access to the works here."

"You're right, Mr. Swift, I have been doing some crooked work. Rather, I tried to do it for Martin Jardine. But I'm through with him for good and all now. I'm working for you, and I'll work faithfully to save your wife and father and others in the burning hotel."

"Let us hope it isn't burning yet," said Tom.

"What about that forest fire?" cried Ned. "Did you have anything to do with it, Chock?"

"Of course I didn't! What do you think I am —a fiend or a madman? What makes you ask such a question as that?"

"Because of something Pietro Notine told me," said Tom.

"Pietro Notine?"

"Yes. Did you once work for that marionette showman?"

"I did, yes; and I'm sorry to say I made a fool

of myself. I got drunk when I was playing engagements in theaters and afterward working in his show. But that's the worst I did—getting drunk—and I'm off that now forever. I've taken a solemn pledge."

"What about setting fire to his marionettes?" asked Tom sternly.

"I never did it intentionally. I was drunk and went to sleep with a cigarette in my mouth—very wicked and foolish. It started a fire; but I woke up when I felt myself scorched, and helped put the fire out. Then I ran away. I wouldn't for the world have done it intentionally. But those marionettes got on my nerves."

"What do you mean?" asked Ned.

"Well, there was one dwarf marionette and I always thought he was meant to poke fun at me. I know now he wasn't, but I was drinking and I imagined all sorts of foolish things. That marionette dwarf made me drink harder, and then came the fire and I skipped out. After that I went to work for Mr. Jardine, though I didn't stop drinking right away. But I'm through now."

"What was the game you and Martin Jardine tried to play? Was it to damage my dirigible?" asked Tom.

"No," the dwarf answered. "But Martin Jardine is queer, and when he found out his brother had called a halt on the big airship, he wanted

me to slip in and take away certain parts without which he thought it could not run. He thought he could force his brother to a compromise by hampering you. But it didn't work."

"No," said Tom. "Such a trick would never work with me. Then you and this Martin Jardine visited the plant one night?"

"Yes, and we had trouble in getting away," Chock said. "It was after that I decided to go straight, and I quit Jardine. But I never set any forest fire and I never would have done anything to damage your dirigible more than temporarily. But I'll be true to you now! I'll risk my life to help save your folks and in that way I'll make up for what I've done. I hope you'll tell Mr. Notine I didn't mean to start that fire in his show."

"I'll tell him," promised Tom.

He and Ned were both impressed with the sincerity of the dwarf, and after a consultation with Lawrence Jardine, who bore out some of what Chock had said regarding the irresponsibility of Martin, it was decided to let the little man accompany them.

"But you must have no further quarrels with Koku!" warned Tom.

"I won't," the dwarf promised. "He can make all the fun of me he wants to and I'll never say a word."

But Koku was too busy even to notice the little man, for there was much need of the giant's strength. Great beams of steel that would have needed a small derrick to put in place in building the cage were lifted around more quickly by Koku, and in this way the work was hastened. Chock, too, was able to use his powerful muscles in narrow quarters where other men found it impossible to gain access. So the two extremes of human life, the dwarf and the giant, labored together on the steel cage that Tom hoped to use in saving those at the fire-encircled hotel.

Between the hours of rushing work Tom was in communication with the forest rangers' headquarters by telephone. Everything possible was being done to check the fire, but the forests were so dry from lack of rain that the conflagration was steadily sweeping upward.

"It looks as if the hotel is doomed," was the message Tom had over the long distance wire. He tried again and again to get in touch with the hotel itself over the wire, but as Mrs. Jardine had said, the copper circuit was cut or burned.

"Did you think Chock set that fire?" asked Ned of his chum, when Tom, directing a gang of men who were getting the dirigible ready, stopped for a moment.

"Oh, at first the thought entered my mind; but he couldn't have got here so soon after setting it

except by airplane, and I don't believe he came that way."

"I wonder if the fire was set, and who did it?" mused Ned.

"That we may never find out," answered Tom.

"Do you think it could have been Martin Jardine?"

"No. He wouldn't be crazy enough for that—to put in danger his brother's wife and children. It's queer, though, why he hasn't shown up here lately."

At last, later in the afternoon, the metal cage was finished. A chain from the top went around a drum driven by an electric motor aboard the *Silver Cloud*. By this means, through a trapdoor in the bottom of the dirigible, the cage could be lowered to the ground and pulled up again into the interior of the big airship.

"It's a small cage to save a whole hotel full of people," said Tom. "But it's as large as we dared make it."

"How much chain have you?" Ned asked.

"About two hundred feet. I daren't go any closer than that to the ground if there is fire near," Tom said. "Well, I think we are ready to leave," he added, as he hurried about the dirigible, making sure that everything was in shape.

At last, with the metal cage in place, the *Silver Cloud*, manned by the brave volunteers, includ-

ing Lawrence Jardine, the giant, and the dwarf, left the ground and was headed for the burning mountain. It was one of the hardest things Tom Swift ever did to refuse Eradicate permission to go. But with the desperate work ahead, it was no place for the aged Negro.

"Yo' cain't save yo' pa wifout me, Massa Tom, an' yo' knows it!" wailed Eradicate, as the ship sailed without him. But it had to be.

With her motors running at top speed, the big dirigible was pointed toward Mt. Camon and in about two hours a rolling cloud of murky haze told the young navigator and his volunteer crew that they were again near the burning forest.

"Now to save them if we can!" cried Tom, as he flew through the smoke over the forest of flames.

"You're flying too high," said Ned. "Your chain is only two hundred feet."

"I know!" Tom exclaimed. "We've got to go lower. It's flirting with death, but it must be done!"

CHAPTER XXIV

OUT OF THE FLAMES

WITH the bursting into flames of the great pine tree so near the hotel wing, a new danger threatened those imprisoned by the circle of forest fire. Yet it was not so much a new danger as an extension of that already menacing them.

"Quick with that hose!" cried Mr. Thorndyke, as his crew of amateur firemen responded to the summons. "Hurry, men!"

"Can any of us help?" asked Mr. Damon.

"We'll do our share," added Mr. Nestor.

"You may have to—later," said the manager, as he directed his men. "This is an isolated blaze at present. It will easily be put out. But the fire from below is drawing nearer. Unless the wardens and their men can check it, I don't see what is to become of us!"

By this time the water was spurting through the hose that had been run out through a lower door. The hotel was provided with great tanks on the roof, thus affording a gravity supply to

different rooms. But the long, dry season had depleted the springs from which water was pumped to the roof tanks, so they were not more than half full.

Suddenly, just as the first sprays of water were directed at the blazing pine tree, the forest giant exploded with a loud report. The heated pitch and other sap within had reached a temperature where they must expand, and they did so, rending the bark and trunk.

This explosion, which felled the tree, sent more masses of blazing material in every direction, and for a moment it looked as if that whole wing of the hotel would catch fire, even though the actual burning forest was some distance down the mountain side.

"Run out another hose!" ordered Mr. Thorndyke; and when this had been done, the blaze, after hard work, was sufficiently wet down to afford temporary relief.

However, all this time the circle of fire about the seemingly doomed hotel was slowly growing closer. The conflagration was eating its way up the mountain, as well as down, but more slowly in the latter direction, as the wind was sweeping toward the summit.

"They should make a back-fire!" declared Mr. Damon, who, with the other guests, including Mr.

Swift, Mary, and her parents, was watching the progress of the fire from a veranda. "It's the only way."

"I think they are doing that," said Mr. Nestor.

Mr. Swift said nothing, but every now and then he would look up toward the smoke-obscured sky, trying to pierce the murky haze.

"What are you looking for?" asked Mary, coming to his side.

"For my son Tom," answered the aged inventor. "He said in his note that he would save us."

"And he will, too! I am sure of it!" declared Mary earnestly.

"Then he must make haste," said the old man in a low voice. "It is getting hard to breathe up here. Don't you feel the heated air, Mary? It is getting closer—the fire!"

"Oh, I hardly think the air is any hotter than it was two hours ago," Mary answered, more because she wanted to reassure the old man than because she really believed it. She felt a sense of oppression and she did have difficulty in breathing, just as Mr. Swift had.

"He can't be long now," went on Tom's father, his weary eyes scanning the sky. "Do you see anything of an airplane, Mary?"

"Not yet, Father. But it would have to be a very big airplane to save all at this hotel, even if

he could land and take a few in at a time. How do you think Tom will manage?"

"I don't know. But he'll find a way," said the old man. "I'll leave it to my son Tom. He'll know what to do."

"Yes," said Mary softly.

"If he had the big aerial warship that we sold to the government, that might do," went on Mr. Swift. "I wonder if Tom thinks of that? But the warship is far away. However, he might get another big craft from the government and come for us in that."

"If he comes at all, I think it will be in the new dirigible," said Mary.

"Oh, Tom will come!" his father declared. "But he would not dare hover the dirigible above the forest of fire."

"Why not?"

"The gas in it would explode. It would mean death for all on board. But Tom will save us somehow."

With weary eyes, the anxious ones in the hotel looked first to the efforts of the men below them, fighting the flames, and again toward the sky, for the message Tom had dropped from the *Wasp* had been picked up, carried to Mary, and had been eagerly read aloud, so that all in the hotel knew its contents and looked for the young inventor to save them. How, they did not know,

nor did even Tom's friends. So they could only wait and hope while the fire hemmed them in closer and closer.

The crackling of the flames could now be plainly heard by those on the hotel grounds and verandas. Every one was outside, for it could not be told at what moment some burning masses might be wafted by the wind and fall on the roof, to set it ablaze.

No one thought of eating, though some of the cooks had prepared a breakfast. A few took coffee, but it was no time to spend over food. When the blazing pine tree had been well doused with water, Mr. Thorndyke sent a crew of men with a hose up to the roof to watch for an outbreak of flames there.

Meanwhile, Tom Swift and Ned Newton, in charge of the big dirigible, had guided the craft until by afternoon it was directly over the hotel, with the circle of fire ever drawing tighter. For a time the smoke was so thick that it obscured the woods and the buildings, and more than once, as Tom gave the signal to descend, such a blast of heated air, tipped with red flames, arose that he had to increase his gas pressure and go up.

"Looks as if we couldn't make it, Tom," gasped Ned, for some smoke had gotten into the control cabin.

"We've got to make it!" was the fierce answer.

"My fortune is yours if you save my wife and children!" cried Mr. Jardine.

"That looks like an opening," Ned cried, pointing down through a rift which appeared in the pall of smoke. "If the wind only holds that way for a time, we can go down and let them know we have come to save them."

"Yes!" exclaimed Tom Swift, and he gave the signal for going down.

Fortunately the wind held, and, for a time at least, the summit of the mountain was comparatively free of the hot, white vapor.

The airship went down rapidly, almost as straight as a descending elevator. It was now within a few hundred feet of the hotel, and suddenly, above a temporary lull in the crackling of the flames, voices from below cried:

"There it is!"

"The big airship!"

"Tom Swift has come to save us!"

Mary, her parents, Mr. Swift, and Mr. Damon heard the cries of joy and hastened toward the rear of the hotel whence came the shouts and on toward the ball field, the largest space around the hotel where there were no trees or shrubbery to catch fire.

"Yes, that's Tom!" cried Mary, recognizing the big dirigible. She waved her hands and kissed them to Tom, but it is doubtful if he saw her.

Slowly the giant of the clouds descended lower and lower.

Then came a cry of despair from a crowd at the rear of the hotel. A great mass of blazing material, matted together, came floating up, borne by a strong wind and, landing in a pile of broken boxes and other débris piled near the main building of the hotel, set it on fire.

"The hose! The hose!" came the appeal.

But before the men with the hose could run the nozzle of it around to the new point of danger the dry wooden structure of the hotel, parched by many days of hot sunshine, had burst into flames almost with the rapidity of an explosion.

"The place is doomed now!" cried Mr. Damon.

"Only Tom Swift and his big dirigible can save us!" exclaimed Mr. Nestor.

Leaving the end of the hotel to burn, and knowing the fire would soon communicate to the entire structure, the guests and help gathered at the ball field, looking up to observe the *Silver Cloud*.

The crowd had no sooner reached the place than flames broke out in the trees and bushes around the ball field. So with one end of the hotel afire and the underbrush at the edges of the recreation ground burning, the guests were fairly hemmed in.

"Get shovels and dig up the field!" cried Mr.

Thorndyke. "If we can make a wide enough patch of bare earth the flames may not cross it. Dig, everybody!"

Shovels were hastily procured and the men and even some of the women, Mary and Mrs. Nestor among them, worked desperately to keep the fire from their little patch of safety. It was an island in a sea of flames.

Tom's airship was now directly above the flames and was coming still lower.

"He'll explode if he comes down any further!" cried Mr. Swift. "That gas can stand so much heat and no more! Go back, Tom! Go back!"

But the *Silver Cloud* came lower and lower, closer to the raging fire that was now consuming the north end of the hotel. Below and all around was a seething caldron of leaping flames.

The dirigible was soon within two hundred feet of the ground. Tom Swift dared not go lower. But it was enough. He gave the word:

"Lower the metal cage!"

CHAPTER XXV

A JOY RIDE

THE metal cage slowly descended on its chain of iron from the interior of the dirigible. The great airship hovered almost motionless over the perilous scene below, with the forests blazing all about and the hotel wrapped in flames that were rapidly devouring it. Only on the ball field was there a temporary place of safety.

"Look! Look!" cried the hotel guests and the servants, when they saw the descending cage. "What is it?"

"Will it put out the fire?" some wanted to know.

"That is Tom's plan to save us!" cried Mr. Swift. "Don't rush now!" he advised, as a nervous movement was observed in the crowd. "I see a board with some instructions painted on it. We must follow his directions if we are to be saved!"

Lower and lower came the cage like an elevator out of its well. The airship swayed slightly, but Tom Swift had set the motors to hold it almost stationary in the wind.

"Steady on the windlass!" ordered Tom from the control cabin of the *Silver Cloud* as, looking down, he observed the progress of the metal cage toward earth.

"Steady she is!" answered Ned.

The crew was on the alert, every man at his station and Koku and the dwarf working together as if they had never quarreled.

With a little jar, the cage touched the earth. There was a rush of frightened men, women, and children toward it, but Mr. Damon, for once rising to the occasion, took charge and ordered them all back.

"Let me read what this says!" he cried, pointing to the sign Tom had fastened to the cage, for there was no time to drop a portable telephone and it was impossible to hear voices between the airship and earth because of the crackle of flames and the screams and cries of the imperiled people.

Mr. Damon read the instructions on the board.

Eight passengers at a time in the metal cage. No more! We will save you all in turn!

"Eight only! Eight!" cried Mr. Damon.

"Then of that eight must be Tom Swift's wife and his father!" shouted Mr. Thorndyke.

"Yes! Yes!" cried many in the crowd. "That's only fair!"

So Mary, Mr. Swift, and then Mary's father and mother were directed into the cage. There was room for four more, and Mr. Damon was about to pick out four from the most hysterical of the women and children, to get them away from alarming the others, when Mary asked that Mrs. Jardine and her son and daughter be taken up in the first ascent. A little girl was then put in and a signal was given from below to those on the *Silver Cloud* to indicate that the cage was filled.

"Up with it!" cried Tom. "Quick!"

The chain wound up on the electric windlass. Slowly the cage with its living freight arose above the ever narrowing ring of fire.

Slowly, but surely and carefully, the cage went up and up until it disappeared within the dirigible through the door in the bottom. Tom was in the windlass room as the cage was caught and held fast. In a moment the safety door was opened.

"Mary!" cried Tom, clasping his wife in his arms.

"Tom!" she sobbed. "I knew you would save us! But there are more down there and the fire is gaining fast!"

"I know!" cried Tom, as he clasped his father's hands. "I will save them all!"

"Tom Swift, my boy!" cried Mr. Nestor, with

a choking voice. "This is the biggest thing you have ever done!"

"It isn't done yet," said the young inventor grimly. "We have a long haul ahead of us!"

Then, as he saw the last of the passengers come out of the cage, he ordered the machinery again set in motion.

Mr. Jardine clasped his wife in his arms and held his children close to him as he said:

"You owe your lives to Tom Swift! Never forget that!"

Mrs. Jardine and her son and daughter turned to Tom to overwhelm him with their thanks, but he modestly disclaimed them.

"Where's Mr. Damon?" Tom asked suddenly.

"He said he wouldn't come up until the last," reported Mary. "He and Mr. Thorndyke."

"A hotel manager true to the tradition of a captain and his ship," murmured Ned, who led the rescued ones to a cabin where they could rest and recover their nerves.

"Are you all right, Mary?" Tom asked, as he went back to see that the windlass machinery was working well.

"All right, Tom dear," she answered. "You came just in time."

"I hope so," he murmured.

Again the metal cage descended, was quickly filled and hauled up. In this way the work went

on until six loads had been taken aboard the *Silver Cloud*. Then came a new problem.

"We're loaded almost to capacity, Tom," stated Ned, as the dirigible began to settle. "What are we going to do?"

"We'll have to fly to a place of safety—where the fire isn't threatening or where it has burned out," Tom answered. "There we'll unload these folks and come back to take on another load until we've saved them all."

"Got to work fast!" commented Ned, as he saw the raging fire below.

"And we will!" echoed Tom.

There was almost a groan of despair from those still in the safety area of the ball field when they saw the blazing hotel and witnessed the departure of the dirigible. But Tom wrote and dropped a message which said:

"Cheer up! We will soon be back!"

The young inventor was as good as his word. Circling over the blazing forest, Tom, in the control cabin of the airship, saw a large tract on the mountain side, a cleared plateau near a small lake in which a little water yet remained.

"We'll land our passengers there, Ned!" Tom cried, and they were quickly transferred by the cage to a place where fire might rim them around

at a safe distance but where, because of almost bare earth, there would be no danger of creeping flames.

Then the big dirigible was hurried back to the rescue work. Those in the *Silver Cloud* worked furiously, lowering and hauling up the loaded cage with eight at a time, while the airship hovered over the burning forest and the fire-swept hotel, now doomed to destruction. In the second cage load were the puppet master and his wife, with some of the marionettes clasped in their arms.

Another trip to the safety plateau near the little lake, another voyage back to the almost despairing ones on the ball field, until at last every soul, women, children, and men, with Mr. Damon and Mr. Thorndyke in the last cageful, had been saved.

Then such a ringing cheer as went up for Tom Swift and his big dirigible! It echoed even above the crackle and roar of the flames.

But the plight of the rescued ones would yet have been hard had it not been for the brave fire wardens and their men.

These intrepid workers, fighting desperately, at last turned the tide of mounting flames until there was a safe path down the mountain, and there, at the edge of the burned district, autos met the refugees and took them to safety.

"What about that hotel?" asked the chief warden, as he greeted Tom Swift, who, having temporarily anchored his airship, climbed down a Jacob's ladder to see how Mary, his father, and the other rescued ones were.

"Looks to me like a complete loss," Tom said. "But we got everybody out. Say, what made this fire gain such headway?" he asked.

"Gasoline and oil," was the answer.

"Do you mean a filling station exploded?"

"No. A crazy man held me up, socked me on the bean, saturated the woods with gas and oil from my delivery auto, and set fire to it," said the wounded driver who was among those rescued.

"Who?" cried Tom, with righteous wrath. "That fellow ought to be hanged!"

"It was that mad gardener, Cosso Tobini," reported the warden. "But he'll never hang."

"Why?"

"He was burned to death in the fire he set. We found his charred body in a puddle of water where he threw himself after he found himself ablaze, I suppose. Near him was a tin box containing a letter in which he said he set the fire to revenge himself on the hotel manager."

"What a terrible revenge," Tom murmured.

"It would have been more terrible but for you, Mr. Swift," said the fire warden. "You deserve a congressional medal of honor."

"Oh, cut that out!" answered Tom lightly. "I'm satisfied—with this!" and he put his arm around his wife.

"I suppose all my pretty things are burned in that hotel," sighed Mary later, when she and her family and some other passengers who had decided to travel that way, were voyaging in the *Silver Cloud*.

It was headed for Shopton. The remaining refugees were being cared for at resorts lower down the mountain, well away from the blazing forest, the fire now, however, almost extinguished.

"Well," Tom said, "I'm afraid there can't be much left."

Later, however, it was found that the main part of the hotel did not burn, for the reason that two great water tanks on the wing which first caught fire fell and put out the blaze. The fire wardens and their men did the rest. But the hotel was not fit to be used. Mary and many others, however, were glad to get back most of their possessions.

As was to be expected, the papers the next day were filled with stories of the great fire and Tom Swift's exploit with his big dirigible. The Swift Construction Company and the Jardine concern were spoken of as having added much to the science of air navigation by the construction of such a ship, while a great deal was said of Tom's

ingenuity in rigging the metal cage. Tom was delighted with the prowess of his craft. Only in that way could the many lives have been saved.

"Well, Mr. Swift, did I come through clean?" asked the dwarf several days later when the exciting experience was something of a memory.

"Yes, you did, Chock," was the answer. "I am glad I trusted you. But I hope this doesn't mean that you and Koku are going to resume hostilities now the danger is over."

"Oh, no. We're good friends," chuckled the dwarf.

"Little man sometimes good as um big man," was Koku's contribution to burying the war hatchet. And from then on the two extremes of life were good friends.

"I said, Tom Swift," remarked Lawrence Jardine, when they were talking over the matter several days later, "that I would do anything in the world for you if you would save my wife and children. You did. As a memento of this, I want you to accept my check for all you spent over and above what my brother advanced on the construction of the big dirigible. Then the ship is yours absolutely."

"I can't accept an offer like that," Tom said. "Why can't the original contract be carried out? Where is your brother Martin? He and you and I ought to get together on this."

"I don't know where Martin is!" said Lawrence, rather bitterly. "He acted the fool and almost plunged me into bankruptcy. If I ever see him again——"

"Will you forgive him?" asked a voice suddenly from the hall outside Tom's private office, and Martin Jardine, no longer the gay, careless character he had been, walked in. He was so serious he was not even smoking.

For a moment Lawrence Jardine stood looking at his brother. But when Martin held out his hand pathetically and again murmured something about forgiveness, Lawrence was not proof against this.

"All right," he agreed. "We'll let bygones be bygones. But why did you try to involve that dwarf with you, Martin?"

"I don't know. Because I was a fool, I guess. We both were, but I couldn't let him come through clean and not do so myself. I'll make it all up to you, Larry!"

"All right, Marty!"

The two brothers were reconciled, and Tom Swift left them alone for a little while. But he was soon called back to the office, for the now reunited Jardine firm members wanted to reestablish the contract Lawrence had repudiated, and this was soon done.

"Then you will take over the *Silver Cloud* as you originally agreed to?" Tom asked.

"When she is finished," said Martin, and his brother nodded assent.

"She's finished now, except for a few repairs and fitting up some of the passenger cabins," Tom said. "You can have her next week."

"Then here's a check in full settlement," said Lawrence. "But I'll only sign it on one condition."

"What's that?" asked Tom.

"That you and yours, I and mine, and brother Martin will have a joy ride in the big dirigible," was the stipulation. "I'd like to take a long voyage away from fire and smoke. I had enough of that up on Mt. Camon," for Lawrence had been among the volunteers and had done valiant work in saving many.

"That suits me," Tom said. "Provided my wife will go."

Mary accepted gladly, so the summer ended in a glorious outing in which they sailed over half the United States in the *Silver Cloud* to the no small wonder of many cities over which they soared. Mr. Swift's health improved so much that he was able to go along, and among the guests were Ned Newton and Helen Morton—as an engaged couple.

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